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A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

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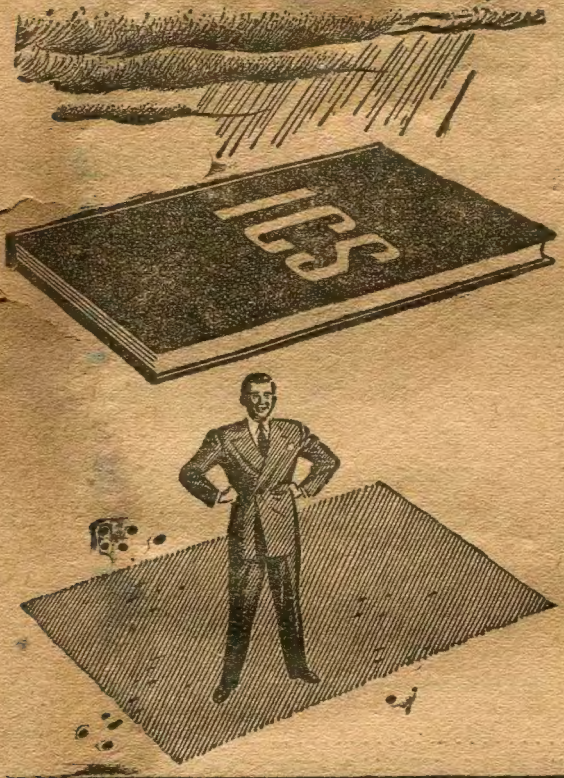

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VOLUME 28, NUMBER 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION SEPTEMBER, 1947

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Law on the Winter Range

By Jackson Cole

Rampaging, raiding outlaws and land-grabbers, whose greed for empire knows no bounds, ride roughshod over the range until the Lone Wolf Lawman takes a hand in their game! Follow a fighting Ranger as he challenges evil despots! 11

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HIYA, gals and galluses! There's been a big change in the eating habits of Western folks in my time. Back in hoss-and-buggy days wild game was an important part in nearly everybody's diet. Not just little tidbits once in a while but plenty of it in season. They counted on it, whether they lived in town or country, whether they hunted and shot it theirownselves or bought it from market hunters.

Nowadays wild meat is a novelty and luxury. It's so uncommon that a flock of folks have never even tasted any.

I'll tell you how I found out. It was at a recent shindig. I asked 20 persons there what was their favorite wild game.

Their answers plum surprised me. Nine out of the 20 had never tasted anything wilder than dried herring. The remaining 11 had never eaten any wild meat outside of venison, duck and rabbit.

About half of them didn't care much about deer meat, claiming it was like tough stringy beef. Their general opinion was that rabbit was sort of tasteless and that wild duck was "too gamey."

Wide Range of Quality

Well, I proceeded to explain that there's just as wide a range in the quality of wild meat as there is in butcher shop meat. Even a wider range, for that matter. Because the law forbids the sale of bad domestic meat as food. Whereas an inexperienced hunter often bags game downright unfit to eat. Or else is careless or ignorant, thus doesn't dress it and care for it proper.

Now take venison. There's all the difference between an old deer, or a thin, half-starved one and a prime animal. As for rabbit, the time of year it's shot is important. And wild ducks, same as barnyard fowl, can be bad-awful or excellent. You wouldn't think of putting a setting hen on the chopping block. But wild game birds are sometimes shot in nesting season.

As a general rule, no wild game bird is good food after it is paired off for mating season.

All wild game is flavored by the food it lives on. That is the "gamey" taste some supercivilized folks object to. To my notion the best venison is a Texas mesquite deer, fattened on the rich seed pods or mesquite beans.

Second best is a Western mule deer, such as found in the inter-mountain region, from northwest Arizona up into Washington, Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. The typical mule deer isn't a forest animal. It forages in open, semi-arid country and fattens mostly on a low browse called chenille.

Cold-Weather Meat

Rabbit is cold-weather meat. Like most grass-eaters, it is best in the fall months. But there's a heap of difference in the kinds of rabbits. Mainly there are cottontails, brush rabbits, jackrabbits and snowshoe hare, sometimes called Sierra hare.

Eastern cottontails, which favor swampy regions, are better eaters than Western cottontails. Little Western brush rabbits often taste like sage, which they can live on. Only a half-grown jackrabbit is anywhere near first-class meat. But snowshoe hare, which resemble the jackrabbit, make a fine dish young or old. Even when it is on the same feed as the jack.

I made sure of this awhile back. While traveling up through Nevada, where the mighty Sierra range tumbles to a vast desert basin, I killed one of each. I promptly skinned out and dressed my kills.

The color and texture of the meat was altogether different. The jack was sinewy, dark and strong. The snowshoe rabbit had bright, light-red flesh which cut up easily and was pleasantly flavored.

Now about wild ducks. There are many species but only two main kinds in the United States. The two kinds are puddle ducks and diver ducks.

Puddle ducks are mallard, black ducks, sprig or pintail, widgeon or baldpate, spoon-

bill or shoveler, gadwall and three members of the teal family called bluewing, greenwing and cinnamon.

Diver ducks are canvasback, redheads, bluebills or scaups and ruddies or wiretails.

The preferred puddle ducks are mallard, sprig and teal. The black duck is essentially the same as the mallard in quality. The diet of these ducks is made up more of weed seeds than of grass (which the widgeon dotes on) or worms and water wigglers (the main fare of the lowly spoonbill).

The Canvasback

Diver ducks are dark-meated and "gamier" to the taste than puddle ducks. Traditionally, the canvasback is the fanciest-eating of all ducks. The truth is, the canvasback is downright fishy and strong in most localities, especially on salt water bays and estuaries.

The canvasback epicures glory over is one that has fed for an interval on wild celery, usually found in mountain lakes. A redhead or ruddy can be just as good as a canvasback on wild celery feed. I challenge anybody to tell the difference between a canvasback and a redhead, for that matter, once the birds are plucked and ready for the oven.

The bluebill is the poor cousin of the diver duck family. It is a coarse feeder, being fond of mollusks, crustacea, even fish. A fish-eating bluebill is next door to being inedible. I've found that they are more palatable if you throat-cut and bleed each bird well immediately after shooting it.

Nearly every cook has a different idea about cooking a wild duck. Most people overcook it. A half-hour in a hot oven suits me. Soaking a duck or any other game in salt water, vinegar or other preparation to destroy the "gamey" taste is rank foolishment. If you don't like the game taste, stick to bacon and eggs.

Only in case a duck is powerful strong or in the case of a leathery old jackrabbit should game be soaked. The best stuffing for a duck—try it sometime—is sauerkraut. Tenderizes the meat as it's cooked and takes up the fishy taste, if any.

Here's a venison hint. There are always small morsels of meat, such as on the ribs, that you are at a loss to know how to use. These scraps make the best mincemeat you ever ate.

Some folks are shy about trying any new

[*Turn page*]

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victuals. Me, I've always welcomed an adventure in eating. To date I've sampled such unusual things as iguana, chuckwalla tails, whale, pickled bear paws, rattlesnake, buffalo hump, antelope, elk and snowbirds. One of these days I hope to try moose nose, which I'm told is a great delicacy.

Most game meat has to hang awhile before it's good. This is specially true about game birds. No need to go to extremes, such as called for by early English custom, which is to hang a pheasant by the tail till it drops off before cooking.

This store-fed generation we're living in has to get used to game as regular victuals. Even in the old days, Western immigrants brought up on beef couldn't go for buffalo until they'd acquired a taste for it. But old plainsmen, to whom "buffler meat" was a staple, put up a holler when returned to beef rations, as they sometimes were when serving as Army scouts and trailblazers.

I reckon you-all have heard that nobody can eat one quail a day for 30 days. It's an old belief. How true it is, I can't say, as I never tried it. Although in desert days I've fed pretty regular on quail and rabbit and suffered no mysterious digestive calamity.

Aging Meat

These are some of the things that I told that crowd at the shindig. When I got to the advice about "aging" meat, up spoke a quiet young veteran.

Says he, "You're right about that. The longer you age wild meat the better."

"And what's been your experience, sergeant?" I inquired.

"It was while I was in the Army in Alaska. One day in practice bombing we blasted open a glacier and laid bare a mastodon carcass. You know, one of those prehistoric hairy mammoth elephants with the longhorn tusks.

"That glacier had done a better job of preserving it than Swift & Company. So the ground crew chopped off a hunk and we had mastodon steaks at mess that night. It was mighty good meat, too."

"I didn't know mastodons were still roaming around up yonder," I remarked.

"They're not, captain. This one had been dead about 50,000 years, we figured."

That tall talk topped mine so I switched the subject fast. We got to confabbing on the size of Alaska. The territory is larger than the State of Texas, the sarge pointed out.

Now that statehood is in the cards, there's a movement toward splitting Alaska up into two states so that us Tejanos can stay big, he says.

But we've got a brand-new brag down Lone Star way. An outfit called the Linguaphone Institute of America made a survey of American cities and comes out with the statement that the most perfect American speech is heard in Dallas. So don't you smile anymore when you hear a Texan drawl, gals and galluses. His palaver is the tops in our language—if he comes from Dallas.

I see where a new super-Western movie about Texas was filmed in Arizona and caused a big ruckus when previewers spotted giant cactus (sahuaro) and other typical Arizona scenery, found nowhere else. It was about as jarring as having an Eskimo play the part of a Comanche.

Sometimes I hanker to meet up with a "location director." My notion is the breed doesn't get around much. I saw a movie about pioneer Oregon in which the climaxing scenes of Indian fighting were shot on logged-over ground where the marks of a modern bulldozer still showed. And the stumps were plainly the job of a power saw. You can be plum sure that no story writer in the TEXAS RANGERS herd could get away with such blunders. The editor would wallop his ears limp.

Maybe such bad-awful mistakes don't bother everybody. But a seasoned Westerner can most generally tell what part of the country a picture is taken in by the kind of grass and rock and brush or trees showing. I can make a pretty good guess myownself usually, sometimes recognize a familiar butte or outcropping or canyon or mountain range. It's like crossing trails with an old friend.

Apache Diorama

One time in New York I went to the American Museum of Natural History and stopped to look at a life-sized reproduction of an Apache village, a creation called a diorama, I think it was, with a stretch of desert scenery painted in the background, all pink and purple and soft-shadowed, like the desert country really looks.

That view somehow haunted me. I studied it a long time, wondering why it sort of hit me smack between the eyes. Suddenly I knew. It was painted from a real hunk of

(Continued on page 108)

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. . . AND SO, WHILE AUTHOR KYNE TRIES ARM-CHAIR DEDUCTION TO FIND THE MYSTERIOUS ARCHER, INSPECTOR MOON VISITS SPORTING GOODS STORES

THAT EVENING

JUST IMAGINE! ME THE MAIN CHARACTER IN A REAL MYSTERY!
YES, AND WITH A DASH OF ROMANCE, IT'LL MAKE A GOOD YARN
HE'S WONDERFUL LOOKING

THIN GILLETTES GIVE YOU SMOOTH, REFRESHING SHAVES THAT LOOK AS GOOD AS THEY FEEL. THAT'S BECAUSE THEY HAVE THE KEENEST, SMOOTHEST-FINISHED EDGES OF ANY LOW-PRICED BLADE ON THE MARKET. WHAT'S MORE THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY. THUS, YOU'RE PROTECTED FROM THE SMART AND IRRITATION OF MISFIT BLADES. ALWAYS ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN Gillette BLADES
4 FOR 10

As Hatfield called, Goldy lashed out and reared (Chapter IV)

LAW ON THE WINTER RANGE

By JACKSON COLE

Rampaging, raiding outlaws and land-grabbers, whose greed for empire knows no bounds, ride roughshod over the range until the Lone Wolf Lawman takes a hand in their game!

CHAPTER I

Icy Guns

THE deep bite of frost was in the clear air and the breath of men and horses was outlined in gray vapor. Wattsville, the trading post on the ice-rimmed river, stood bleak on the vast plain. Brush and trees had lost their foliage but here and there patches of discouraged brown leaves clung with defeated desperation to the dark branches.

Away to the south loomed the ragged and abrupt escarpment of the Staked Plain. From the north the winter gales

A COMPLETE JIM HATFIELD NOVEL

could sweep from the Arctic through Texas without encountering any more resistance than wire fences might offer.

On the west rose bluish mountains that were in New Mexico. In the vicinity the country stretched in rolling waves which made excellent grazing ground for longhorns, mustangs and what remained of the buffalo.

Wattsville centered about a large saloon and general store which were attached by a covered passage. The sign on the roof included both and proclaimed Gus Watts to be the proprietor. There were outbuildings of native adobe and timber and several nondescript cabins leaning wearily on either side of the beaten track known as Watts Avenue. All sorts of materials had been used to chink cracks left by shrinking green cottonwood or careless builders. Strips of rusted iron and of leather supplemented the walls in an effort to keep out the sifting dust of summer and the cold of the winter.

The sun was a pale yellow disc in the intense blue sky as Rancher Newt Ellington dismounted in front of the store, stamped his booted feet, and slapped his arms around his heavy shoulders to restore circulation. A pioneer in far west Texas, Ellington was a positive man with thick brows and crisp brown mustache matching his chestnut hair. His red face was set from the icy wind, the skin shining from the bite of the winter.

The brand on his mustang was LL. The animal had grown a thick and shaggy coat as nature's protection.

"Phew!" exclaimed Ellington to his saddle companion, and the frosty air showed a vapor track from his breath, just as it did from the heavy exhalations of the horses. "I feel it all the way to the bone, Muller. We better blanket these mustangs or they'll freeze solid!" His clear brown eyes sought those of the other cowman.

Colonel Rafe Muller was tall and spare. He felt the cold more than a stouter person might have, and his bony hands were blue even inside the furlined gauntlets he removed when he unfolded his blanket. He was a friend and neighbor of Ellington's and in his deep-socketed blue eyes could be seen the wisdom which comes to a man with the years if he is willing to learn. His face was hawklike and seamed from age and weathering. Like Ellington he wore a leather jacket lined with fur and woolen trousers under his chaps.

"Let's have a drink before we go to the store, Newt," he suggested.

THEY blanketed their horses and left them in the lee of the buildings before entering the Wattsville tavern. The saloon consisted of a large room with plank flooring and a bar made of boards set on upended casks. A Mexican was tending bar.

There were rough tables and benches for the use of customers, but at the moment the chilly ranchers sought the comfort of the big wood stove near the middle of the far wall. It glowed red in its spacious rounded center and threw off gratifying waves of heat. A couple of cowboys were slouched at the other end of the bar and the ranchers nodded to them.

"Howdy, Pedro," said Ellington, turning to the bar for a drink. "Where's the boss?"

"Senor Watts he ees in store," replied the Mexican.

After a drink Ellington and Muller opened a small door and walked through the dark enclosed passageway leading to the store. Through a second doorway which they closed behind them, they reached the emporium, where everything that could be transported such a distance was sold.

The cowmen snaked through barrels of salt pork and boxes of drygoods, past shelves loaded with boots and shoes, shirts and hats, bolts of cloth and a thousand other items.

There were shotguns and rifles and six-shooters for sale, and ammunition for the weapons.

Through the small windows came dim light, and there was another glowing stove in the open space by the counter. The two ranchers went to stand with their

backs to it, feet spread wide, hands clasped behind them.

On the counter, with one slippered foot on the splintery floor, sat a stout man in a wool shirt and thick dark pants. Jowls hung from his red face, and his eyes were a light blue. His nose was flat and so snub that the nostrils were entirely visible. Curly hair grew on his big head but he had a bald spot which he caressed with the palm of a pudgy hand as he regarded the customers.

Jim Hatfield

This was Gus Watts, owner of the saloon, the store, and most of Wattsville. He pushed out a bottle and glasses and when they had helped themselves he poured a drink into a cup and downed it at a gulp, smacking his lips and sniffing.

"Ugh, ugh," he grunted. "This weather gets me, gents. Catarrh's mighty bad today. Whisky helps some."

"Well, Gus," began Colonel Muller, "we've been makin' the rounds since we talked that new county setup over with yuh. Everybody agrees that taxes are too high and too many."

"We aim to form a citizens' committee," declared Newt Ellington. "We'll have a county of our own right in these parts where we can control it, and the charges we have to pay. Why should we hand over taxes to New Mexico when we're Texans? It don't make sense to have our sheriff and all the law way acrost the mountains in another state."

"We've picked a site for our county seat," announced Muller. "It'll be twenty miles northwest of here and will be a lot handier for most of us. Gus, you can open a branch store there or move."

Gus Watts thought it over. Then he said slowly, "In my position, I can't afford to rub folks the wrong way. I'm neutral."

"How can yuh be?" said Muller quickly. "Yuh got to pay these crazy taxes and they must run mighty high with all you own. They're chargin' for land, water and all sorts of things. Next it'll be a tax on the

air we breathe." The colonel was angry.

Newt Ellington banged his fist on the counter. "We'll bust loose from New Mexico and fix things to suit ourselves!"

A faint clicking at the rear of the roomy store drew their attention. The back door softly opened and men crowded in. They wore black hoods with slanted eye-slits and breathing-holes. Three looked huge in buffalo hide coats, a fourth sported a black bearskin reaching to his shins, and the two others wore lined leather jackets. They had strapped their hats over the hoods. In such a rig it would have been hard to recognize even a close friend.

Weapons were up to cover Ellington, Watts and Muller. Sawed-off shotguns, and Colts pinned them.

"Reach!" a gruff voice ordered. "This is a holdup."

Watts sniffed violently and gasped: "Don't—don't shoot, boys! Help yoreselves."

COLONEL RAFE MULLER stood between Ellington and the bandits. Muller put up his hands at the command as did Watts and Ellington for it would have been sure death to disobey.

"We teach yuh to make trouble!" The outlaw in the black bearskin shouted angrily. "No new county and shereef here!" He spoke with a faint accent characteristic of Mexican-Americans in that part of the country.

The words had no more than left the lips of the man—obviously the leader—than he pulled the trigger of his shotgun. Muller was ripped wide open by the buck which had not begun to spread at the pointblank range. A gaping hole appeared in Muller's jacket and blood spurted as he fell against the hot stove and slid to the floor.

Newt Ellington was a quick thinker. A pioneer who had fought Comanches and other savages for possession of the land, Ellington seized the instant gained as his friend died. The second load from the bandit shotgun flew wide as Ellington dived for the end of the counter, his Colt jumping to hand.

Crouched at the front of the store, Ellington sent two heavy bullets into the bunched killers. One was hit and staggered back. A volley forced the rancher down and the outlaws hunted cover behind barrels and boxes at the rear.

Gus Watts was gasping. "Don't kill me!" he cried. "The cash is in that cigar box, fellers!"

Stealthy sounds reached the desperate Ellington and he sought to place his enemies by this but Watts' terrified voice interfered. Two masked men, one the Mexican in the bearskin, snaked behind the long counter toward Ellington's precarious position. Ellington bellowed for help.

"Bandits! Holdup in the store!"

Outside the store, not far down the road, another cowman named Jeff Byler was watching the smoke in the crisp air.

"Where there's smoke there's fire and that's just what I crave, Monty," he said to his gray gelding.

Monty only snorted. His thick, shaggy coat protected him from the biting wind, and he was warmed by exercise.

Byler's tall, broad-shouldered form was cased in lined leather and he wore earmuffs, but his face felt stiff with cold. His kerchief was drawn to his straight nose but still his cheeks had been bitten. He was seasoned to winter weather, though, since he had worked several seasons on a Wyoming ranch. He had started for Texas, urged on by the old restlessness of man for new horizons. He'd had an idea of trying Arizona or New Mexico, so had swung west.

Thick hair the color of straw showed under Byler's Nebraska hat. His far-seeing blue eyes were set wide and his features were those of a fine, upstanding man—which he was, for Byler knew his job on any range and could be depended upon.

The wandering cowboy carried a Colt six-shooter and a Sharps .50-caliber single-shot carbine in a saddle holster. A blanket roll and canvas pack completed his traveling equipment.

The sight of the little settlement was most welcome and he urged Monty on to where saddled horses stood outside the low buildings. Then, abruptly, Byler heard the sharp cracks of pistols and someone yelling desperately for help. It came from the store, so Byler veered that way. Toward the rear a masked man who stood holding the reins of seven steaming mustangs threw a hasty shot at the cowboy.

Hatfield had to shoot—and fast—for spreading buck would hit Byler and Beans (CHAPTER XVI)

The lead whistled close, but Byler made the front of the store, jumping to the frozen ground and thence to the porch.

"Holdup! This way!" came the frantic call from inside again.

Byler peered through a wide window and saw a middle-aged man in leather crouched at the end of a counter, gun in hand. He saw two more, one behind the other, creeping behind the counter but a pile of boxes cut them off from the victim's line of vision. The black hood masks the two wore marked them to Byler as bandits.

Naturally courageous, Jeff Byler was not easily stampeded, even when the outlaw in the lead saw him and paused to fire at him. The slug snapped through the glass, leaving a small hole from which many tiny fractures radiated. Byler jumped, feeling a sudden burning on his left cheek.

He let go twice and hastily ducked, for both bandits were taking better aim at him. He felt blood flowing from the furrow in his cheek and wiped at it with his left hand. But anger, and the desire to help a fellowman in distress held him there.

The guns blared inside again. Byler bobbed up and fired at the men behind the counter. He saw one fold up and the other turned to scamper back. The crouched victim was shooting at more holdup men in the back of the store, around the end of the long counter.

Byler hit the latch with the end of his Colt barrel and kicked the door open from the side. Bullets tore through but he was off to the left of the entry. With the door ajar the cowboy was able to look deep into the crowded store. A long figure lay still before the counter while a fat man, bleating in alarm, was trying to make his rotund form smaller behind a barrel of salted fish. From behind boxes and other spots of cover glinted beady eyes through the slits of the hoods, while burly shoulders were hunched over guns trained toward the front.

A shotgun belched and the buck scattered, some flying through the doorway, close to Byler. Smoke drifted inside, and hoping it would cover him, Byler bobbed out to try for the killers. But the stinging lead came too close and he spidered back under the wide window. Besides, he had to watch for the outlaw holding the horses around the corner.

Byler gingerly peeked through the cracked glass. The fellow he had hit had come up on his knees and was dazedly rubbing at his head. His Stetson was pushed back and hung from its strap around his neck. The black cloth hood was in his hand pushed up so that Byler had a clear view of a lean brown face and black hair.

The outlaw was clearly of Mexican strain. He had a hawk nose and his clenched teeth were dazzlingly white, contrasting with the ebony of liquid eyes. Likely he would have been handsome had it not been for a long knife scar that angled across his left cheek, the cicatrized flesh white against the bronzed skin.

"I'll savvy yuh next time I see yuh, hombre!" muttered Byler.

His preoccupation with the Mexican nearly cost Byler his life as the outlaw who had been holding the mustangs surged around the building. Just in time Byler saw him, fell and rolled off as a Colt slug kicked up splinters from the boards. Byler's own hasty shot forced the gunny back, but the next instant the masked bandit saw something which forced him to full retreat, shouting as he ran:

"Everybody out, boys! Danger!"

CHAPTER II

The Double

BYLER pushed under the window in time to see the masked men inside the store supporting the shocked Mexican hurrying through the back exit. Then he saw the reason for their haste. A group of hard-riding cowboys were approaching from the west.

The man Jeff Byler had helped burst from the store, throwing himself aside to avoid parting slugs from his foes. Fury blazed in his eyes, his hat was gone, and his crisp chestnut hair awry.

"Double L, this way!" he roared at the waddies.

He was heavy, over forty, Byler saw as

the man turned to him.

"Yuh saved my hide," he said, breathless from exertion and excitement. "I'm obliged. They downed my friend Colonel Muller and tried for me. I'm Newt Ellington."

"My handle is Jeff Byler," said the wandering cowboy. "Heard the ruckus, and seein' the black masks cinched it, so I horned in."

"Lucky for me yuh did."

Blood flecked Ellington's cheeks but it was from scratches. He was raging to lead a chase when the Double L drew up on steaming mustangs. But the outlaws who had carried off their wounded had fresh mounts, while the Double L had come a long way. Ellington soon called it off, and they all rode back.

Rafe Muller was dead. Gus Watts was snuffling in alarm and needed the whisky he was consuming as Ellington and his outfit as well as Muller's entered. After covering Muller's body with a blanket, Ellington led the men to the bar. They needed the warmth of a drink.

Byler learned then that Ellington and Muller had ridden into town ahead of their men—which had proved disastrous to one of the ranchers, while the other had barely escaped death. Ellington could not thank Byler enough for what he had done.

"Cussed outlaws, tryin' to rob a man," said Byler.

"There was more to it than that, I figger," growled Ellington. "They were layin' for Muller and me because we aim to start a new county in these parts. Yuh see, Byler, a New Mexico county sent a sheriff over here to collect high taxes from us for water and on our land so Muller and I have been spreadin' the word we mean to set up to suit ourselves. One of them outlaws mentioned that."

"Mebbe the bandits hereabouts don't want any local law officers so close," suggested Byler.

"I reckon that's it," agreed Ellington soberly.

The rancher meant to buy supplies and spend the night in Wattsville. "We'll take Muller home in the mornin' boys," he said. "Though I'd rather cut out my tongue than tell his wife, but it's got to be done."

They ate a hot meal and slept indoors on the saloon floor. Next morning Ellington bought what he needed and the Double L started for home. At Ellington's urgent invitation Jeff Byler went along.

"I'm headin' for Arizona," said Byler. "so yore spread won't be out of my way."

Late in the afternoon they reached the Muller ranch carrying the colonel on his own horse. Jeff Byler waited outside with the other cowboys while Ellington went in to break the terrible news. Byler knew it would be a long time before he could forget the cries of the widow and the sight of the fatherless children.

IT WAS close to dark when they arrived at the Double L. The ranchhouse had been built beside a river bordered by willows and cottonwoods and surrounded by rolling plains covered by curly grasses. The mountains were not far off and patches of snow were on the slopes. Heavy timber and brush covered the hills while evergreens made black areas with their perpetual plumage. Bare gray and red rocks thrust up in tortuous strata. It was excellent cattle country and even in the cold of winter the cattle had shelter.

The house was of thick adobe bricks and logs from the forests. It was in Spanish style, of one story with a patio, and wings radiating from this as a center. There was a bunkhouse, a smokehouse, sheds and barns, of brick or native timber. The river never went dry and while the edges froze the flow was enough to maintain open water in the middle. While the crew saw to the horses, Ellington insisted that Byler come to the house. "I want yuh to meet the family right off so's they can thank yuh, too," he insisted.

The prospect worried Byler, who was shy of women, but he could not think of a good excuse so slouched after Ellington. Oil lamps had been lighted in the main room which was cozily furnished with curtains and straw rugs, tables and chairs. A wood fire burned in the fireplace and a pot-bellied stove gave steady heat.

"Cora, meet Jeff Byler," said Ellington, as his wife came to greet him. "We had a close call in Wattsville when a passel of outlaws held up the store. They killed Rafe and they'd have got me if it hadn't been for this cowboy."

Cora Ellington was a comely woman

with light hair and large brown eyes. Her gratitude as she thanked Jeff Byler for saving her husband's life made the cowboy tingle with embarrassment.

"It wasn't anything, ma'am," he insisted.

"It was everything to us, young man," declared Mrs. Ellington. She made him sit down. "You're going to stay with us. We won't hear to your riding on right away. I have a roast for supper. I knew you'd all be starved when you got back."

Two boys came into the room, noisily greeting their father. Ellington introduced them. The elder, a lad of about seventeen, looked like his father, with the same chestnut hair and strong face. His name was George. The other was six years younger, shorter and heavier, with close-clipped light hair. He was called "Beans" by all the others, though his name was John.

"Wouldn't yuh like to wash up, Byler?" asked Ellington, and led the way to the kitchen.

"Father!"

A girl in a red apron and blue calico dress left the hot stove and turned to kiss Ellington when he came in.

Jeff Byler paused in the doorway, unconsciously staring at her. The heat had put roses on her rounded cheeks and her amber hair was held in place by a high Spanish comb. She was slender, lithe, and youthfully curved, and Byler thought he had never seen such a lovely girl. As she turned her long-lashed brown eyes to his, her red lips parted, and Byler's heart somersaulted and blood burned his face.

"I had to watch the potatoes—they're near done," she said. "Are you all right, Dad? I heard what you told Mother."

"Fine, thanks to this buckaroo," replied Ellington heartily. "He jumped into a scrap we had in Wattsville with some outlaws holdin' up the store." He added soberly, "They killed Rafe Muller." He sniffed at the aromas of the kitchen. "When do we eat? I'm starved." Then he remembered he had not made introductions. "This is Jeff Byler," he said. "My daughter, Amanda."

Amanda held out her hand and Byler took it. He felt clumsy and regretted he had not shaved that morning. Her gaze was earnest, almost solemn as she studied him and Byler could feel she was appraising him. He wanted to make a good impression but her scrutiny made him feel awkward and he blinked as she watched his face.

She did not smile but her eyes did. Then she turned back to the stove.

"Get ready," she said. "We'll eat in ten minutes."

Byler stumbled against a chair as he followed Ellington to the shed to wash up. He had a straight razor with him and went out to fetch his pack and get the razor and a clean shirt. When Amanda called time, he was ready to eat and had washed off the grime. A fresh bandanna at his bronzed throat and a blue shirt set off his good looks.

THAT night Byler slept in the bunkhouse with ten Double L cowboys. For a time he lay awake under the wool blankets in the cold room, and thought about Amanda. Something had happened to the world, since he had seen her. It had brightened and grown more interesting. His own affairs seemed less pressing and the Double L appeared a most desirable spot.

"I might hang around here for the rest of the winter," he mused. "That was a real swell meal she cooked up too."

Breakfast was hearty and was set before them by Amanda and her mother, who had been up at dawn. The girl was fresh and pretty in the morning light and she had a smile for Byler. After eating the men went outside, for the work of the day was about to begin. There was a lot to do about such a ranch.

Newt Ellington came to Byler. "From what yuh said yesterday, Jeff, yuh have to be ridin'. I s'pose yore business in Arizona can't wait. I'd be glad to have yuh here at the spread, but I reckon yuh won't stick."

"Well, yuh got a nice outfit here, Mr. Ellington. I thought it over and mebbe I'll stay if yuh're shore yuh can use me."

"That's fine. I aim to expand in the spring and yuh're the sort of hombre I want to help me." Ellington was delighted.

Jeff Byler could make a hand anywhere and Ellington watched him with increasing satisfaction during the day. He could see that the new rider was expert with animals and there was no need to tell Byler how to go about the tasks.

During the noon meal they talked over the holdup at Wattsville.

"They shore were quick on the trigger," said Ellington. "Seemed they wanted to kill me and Muller more than to get money."

"Yuh don't savvy who they are?" asked Byler.

"No. Their hood masks and the bulky clothes they had on made a real disguise."

"I figger I'd know that Mexican again if I see him," declared Byler. "The one behind the counter whose mask come off."

"I would, too." Ellington nodded. "I had a good peek at him when they dragged him out."

Byler grew more and more satisfied with the Double L. He had quickly found out from Beans Ellington, who was talkative in a small brother's way, that Amanda was not engaged and had no steady admirers that she seemed to favor. A silver dollar bought Beans' full devotion and the lad liked big Jeff from the start. Byler went out of his way to please Beans, who stuck with the new hand wherever Byler went.

On the third day of Byler's arrival at the Double L, Byler and three other cowboys were working a small herd of cows which had drifted with the wind close to the buildings. Beans was assisting, as he was a good roper and rider.

"Say, them are funny lookin' hombres, Jeff," exclaimed Beans suddenly.

Byler looked around. A party of horsemen were approaching, headed for the ranch. There were some thirty of them and as Byler stared he realized that many wore black hoods and others had drawn up their kerchiefs.

"Hey, boys, back to the ranch!" shouted Byler. "It's the outlaws. They've picked up a gang and are comin' at us!"

Double L men leaped to saddles and, herding Beans before them, tore back to the ranch. Newt Ellington and the others were working in the yard and Byler sang out warning.

"Inside the house!" ordered Ellington, seizing command. Those thick adobe walls, he knew, would stop any bullet.

The charging bandits opened fire as the Double L outfit piled into the ranchhouse. Lead spattered against the house. Quickly Newt Ellington disposed his Double L men about inside the building, at windows. The doors were bolted. The women were sent to an inside room where they

"Reach!" ordered Hatfield. "If yuh yell I'll kill yuh" (CHAP. VII)

would be safer.

Then the attack began in earnest. Heavy buffalo guns boomed in the cold air and slugs came through the windows, sending splinters of glass and wood flying.

Jeff Byler crouched at a front window corner where he could see that the enemy had surrounded the ranch, shooting in. It was three to one but the Double L had the advantage of good shelter. Byler thanked his lucky stars that he had seen the gang in time, for had the killers reached the yard they would have downed Ellington and the men with him without mercy.

Now it was a stand-off. And exploding guns and hoarse shouts of challenging hate mingled in the cold air.

CHAPTER III

Trouble in West Texas

CAPTAIN WILLIAM McDOWELL, Chief of Texas Rangers, sat with unusual quietude at his desk in his Austin headquarters. His old eyes were riveted to the large detail map of west Texas nailed to the wall and the extra wrinkles in his face and the way the shaggy white brows knitted together showed that he was deep in thought, wrestling with a difficult problem.

It grew so still that a small gray mouse emerged from his hiding-place in the cracked baseboard and strolled about nibbling crumbs from McDowell's lunch. And the clerk in the outer office tiptoed to the door to peek in, fearful that at last the Grim Reaper had come to claim the aged officer who had fought said G.R. off with the same grim determination he had shown in days of yore in other battles. For McDowell had been a star Ranger and had accounted for many of the Lone Star State's most dangerous enemies.

Now, in retrospect, McDowell could see himself spring to the back of his spirited mustang, raise a powerful arm waving a Colt Frontier Model revolver, and bellow in a voice which could best the cyclone, "For-rd mar-ch!" Behind him his troop of picked fighting Rangers deployed for battle, and ahead the outlaw enemy froze in hypnotic fright as their nemesis charged.

"Ouch!" McDowell cursed as reality reclaimed him.

The clerk saw the spasm of rheumatic pain twisting the captain's features and, hearing the profanity which followed, he sighed with relief. He ducked but McDowell had seen him and roared:

"Spyin' on me, eh? Send Ranger Hatfield pronto or I'll come out there and teach yuh not to waste the State's time!"

He lowered himself to the edge of the desk and tapped a booted foot on the floor. The mouse, like the clerk, had fled at the loud sounds McDowell made. Those sounds had been mainly caused because it was a bitter pill and one McDowell had to swallow regularly to realize he was too old for saddle work. He had to let off steam.

A quiet tread sounded in the hall and a big man turned into the office, a slow-moving young fellow in cowboy rig. He wore high spurred boots and a clean blue shirt with dark trousers, a bandanna and a big Stetson with the chinstrap loose in its runner.

"Hatfield!" greeted McDowell. "I'm stumped. Up a tree with the bear sittin' below, savvy? Look at this."

"Yes suh, Cap'n McDowell," Hatfield said, in a soft, drawling voice.

Jet-black hair showed under his curved hat. His eyes were a gray-green, but could darken in anger to the icy glint of a frozen sea. His severe and rugged face was relieved by a generous mouth, an indication that while McDowell's star Ranger was death to evil men, he was capable of the utmost kindness in dealing with decent people.

Jim Hatfield stood well over six feet and his legs were long and strong. He tapered from wide shoulders to narrow hips where hung heavy Colts in supple holsters. Bronzed and glowing with health, he was a striking specimen of Texas manhood. In him was the rippling power of a leashed panther. He could move with devastating speed and those slender hands had accounted for one after another outlaw who had dared to ruffle the peace of the Lone Star State.

McDowell's knotted forefinger paused on the map.

"See this strip north of the Staked

Plain?" he said. "It looks small on paper but it's a mighty big stretch of land larded with streams. Grazin' is fine and more and more settlers are movin' in, mostly Texans."

Hatfield knew the state map about as well as McDowell did, although the Ranger did not have the captain's sources of inside political information. "Ain't that disputed ground, suh?"

"That's right," nodded McDowell. "That's why the line is dotted. The border has never been settled on. Wasn't many folks over there, but now it's openin' up. Yuh savvy that Texas wants no fuss with her neighbor, New Mexico, which also claims that stretch. My idea is that the pioneers who go in can say which state they'll hang to. Because of the dispute there's no law at all in there and it's a question of jurisdiction, which must be handled with kid gloves. It's a challenge to the Rangers, for many Texans are in danger and they deserve pertection."

McDOWELL paused, and watched the Ranger for his reaction.

"I'll need special equipment," murmured Hatfield. "The winters run mighty cold up there."

"Draw whatever yuh want. It's a long run, Hatfield. I ought to send a troop, but yuh savvy how short I am of officers to enforce the law. Here's the details. A Colonel Rafe Muller has been killed by masked bandits at Wattsville, a small tradin' post in the area. I got a letter of complaint on this from a rancher who signs himself Newt Ellington.

"He says outlaws swarm the hills and strike out from their hideouts at the ranches, whenever they please. They tried to capture Ellington's place but he managed to beat 'em off. Sounds like they're mighty bold. That ain't all. I have more kicks from folks who say high taxes are bein' collected in the strip. I figger these taxes are illegal."

Hatfield studied the complaints and noted details in his keen mind.

"Keep yore identity secret till yuh're shore of yore ground," counseled McDowell. "It's a ticklish job."

This fitted in with Hatfield's usual mode of operation. He preferred to enter a case quietly and make certain of both sides before divulging his mission.

"I'll go pick up what I need, Cap'n," he said, "and then I'll stop and say *adios*."

When he returned, McDowell was waiting outside to say good-by. Hatfield had the special equipment he would need for cold weather work—a fur-lined jacket, heavy wool trousers to wear under his leather chaps, fur gloves and extra wool blankets for himself and for the magnificent golden sorrel he rode.

Goldy was Hatfield's mount and a fit companion for the tall officer. The sorrel could stand any pace and his speed was phenomenal. Such a horse was one in a million and Hatfield prized Goldy above everything.

The Ranger waved a slim hand to old McDowell, who waved in return, sad that he could not go along.

"Cinch it for Texas if yuh can!" sang out the captain as Hatfield headed the golden sorrel northwest from Austin. . . .

* * * * *

The sky was leaden cold. Westward loomed the mountains of New Mexico while south and southwest bulked the ragged escarpment of the Staked Plain. The winter wind whined at will over this vast expanse, cutting through even the thick protective garments of the rider and forcing the powerful sorrel to veer from its deadly bite. Patches of ice and frozen snow gleamed in low areas.

But here icy winds, frozen water and earth and blizzards must be expected during the winter. The outlaws said to be operating would not be looking for lawmen in such weather, an advantage which McDowell and Hatfield appreciated.

Hatfield looked even bigger than usual in the fur-lined leather jacket, wool trousers and thick brown chaps. Ear protectors, furred gauntlets, and the raised bandanna helped guard him from the frost's menace. Yet he felt chilled to the bone.

He was grateful when he sighted a stain of smoke in the sky ahead.

"That'll be Wattsville, I reckon," he muttered.

The Ranger intended calling on Newt Ellington as his first move, and from what the rancher had said in his complaint, the Double L was west and north of the trading post. But right now hot food and warm quarters were what Hatfield craved. He had made good time on his long journey, but even so it had taken many days

of steady riding.

Hatfield watered Goldy lightly at a pool on the east side of the little river. What ice had formed had recently been cracked by horses coming through but along the edges where the stream moved slowly the reeds and margins were frozen.

He rode Goldy toward the settlement and noted a long shed open only to the south, and so offering protection for standing animals. There he rubbed Goldy down and carefully blanketed the sorrel. A dozen other saddled mustangs were in the shed and several salt bricks had been fastened to the wall. Goldy began vigorously licking one of them as the Ranger strode with cold-stiffened long legs toward the saloon. The sign over the closed door said:

WATTS' LAST CHANCE

He lifted the iron latch and stepped inside.

THE heat hit him and the odor of fried beef and other foods came gratefully to his hungry soul. Some customers stood at the crude bar, while others sat at tables or leaned against the wall close to the pot-bellied stove. A couple of lanterns hanging from the rafters had been lighted as the windows were small and the day dark.

"Howdy, sir," said a fat man seated behind the bar. "Cold, ain't it?"

"Yes suh, mighty harsh," replied the Ranger, as his eye swiftly covered the company.

The stout proprietor snuffled and took a drink of whisky before arising to wait on the new customer. He wore wool pants and shirt and his eyes were light in hue. The flat nose was snub so that the nostrils stared at one like a second set of eyes. His hair curled thick on his big head but the expanse was broken by a round bald spot. When he moved his head his jowls shook.

The other men present wore heavy range clothing and had a tough aspect in general. Some were bearded while others had recently shaved but all faces showed the effects of wind and sun. They were of various builds, tall and lean or heavy, short and slight, with a couple of stout figures. All were armed. A good-looking young Mexican among them had a hawk nose and white, even teeth, but as he turned his head to answer the jest of a friend, a knife scar showed white against the bronzed skin of his left cheek.

"What'll it be?" asked the fat man behind the bar.

"The regular poison," drawled Hatfield, and red-eye was pushed out.

"The grub smells good," said the Ranger.

The proprietor whistled and a Mexican in a dirty apron came to the connecting door at the back.

"Pedro, scorch a couple more steaks and fetch 'em in. Better make fresh coffee."

"*Si*, Senor Watts."

"Yuh're Gus Watts, owner of this shebang?" asked Hatfield.

"That's me. Come far?"

"A long ways and I'm goin' farther." Everybody was listening with the usual curiosity. But Hatfield knew it was best to let men know what to think rather than have them guessing. "My handle is Jim Haynes. I sold my ranch on the Red River and aim to buy near Santa Fe. An old pard of mine is over there and wrote me I better come."

This was satisfactory. Watts chatted about the price of beef and how the girls in the Kansas cowtowns were dancing the cancan. After what seemed an interminable wait to the starving Ranger, Pedro carried in a big platter with two steaks sizzling on it, surrounded by mounds of fried potatoes and a pot of coffee with a thick white cup hung on its spout.

Pedro was a good cook, but right now the Ranger was not critical. He set to with a will.

CHAPTER IV

A Robbery That Failed

WHEN Hatfield finished his meal he again chatted with Gus Watts.

"What's the best way of reachin' the Double L from here?" he finally asked.

"Yuh mean Newt Ellington's?" asked Watts.

"That's right." Hatfield thought he sensed a quickening of interest among the company at mention of Ellington.

"Yuh bear north on the river branch and it's a forty-mile run," Watts replied. "Is Newt a friend of yores?"

"No. Never heard of him till this mornin' when I passed a waddy on my way over. Asked him about stoppin' points through to Santa Fe and he mentioned Wattsville and the Double L."

"I savvy. Ellington comes here for his supplies and mail. It would be midnight before yuh make it even if yore hoss is fresh. It's a cold spell for ridin'."

"Yuh got a spare spot for me to bunk?"

"Yuh're welcome to spread yore blankets on the floor by the stove, mister."

"*Gracias*," murmured the Ranger.

Goldy and Hatfield needed a rest and the warmth of the saloon made the Ranger sleepy. He went out to look at his gelding. Goldy stood in the shed. His intelligence was such that a tether was not required for he would stay within the vicinity and come when Hatfield whistled.

Hatfield went back and sat around the saloon until the night closed in. It was bleak and the tiny trading post was a life-saving oasis in the frozen world. The customers took their leave early and Watts closed up. About nine P.M. the stout owner turned in.

Hatfield blew out the last of the lanterns and spread his blankets near the stove, which had been banked for the night. He was trained to sleep on a hair trigger yet could relax in the midst of danger. He did not anticipate trouble at the moment for he had not taken any steps against the outlaws infesting the far west of Texas.

He had taken off his heavy coat to put over him and used his Stetson as a pillow, but kept on his boots. Lying on his back, he had a revolver by his right hand. The stove gave a faint reddish glow and the night was silent save for the soughing of the wind, which brought a cozy feeling to one in shelter. Soon he slept.

It was pitch black when he came awake. A loose shutter banged in the wind and he was gripping his drawn Colt as he listened. A horse whinnied, and the Ranger thought it was Goldy. But as he tensed to rise the front door latch clicked faintly and he knew men had stealthily entered the saloon.

Through lowered lashes he watched but could make out nothing. The intruders might be honest men with a perfect right to come into the place. They might have reached Wattsville after a long ride and be hunting shelter and warmth to save their lives.

"Sh! He's by the stove!"

The Ranger caught the cautioning whisper and concluded they had come for him. He was ready as a couple of muffled figures tiptoed toward him. The stabbing ray of a bull's-eye lantern found him and the officer could see the hood masks on their heads.

"Get the money," came another whisper. "I'll cover him!"

The man with the lantern had a drawn pistol and his aide crossed to stoop over Hatfield.

But the man assigned to rob the victim had made an error, for in his eagerness he interposed himself between his companion's gun and Hatfield. The Ranger brought up his strong legs and shoved his booted feet into the thief's face. Straightening out, he hurled the outlaw into the other one. The Ranger rolled over and up, his hammer spur clicking back under a long thumb as he cocked his Colt.

The stove would stop a slug and the officer slid around it as the cursing gunny recovered his balance and fired a hasty shot which plugged into the floor a yard from Hatfield. The hot bull's-eye lantern had contacted the flesh of the man staggering back and his screech of surprised pain filled the saloon. The lantern fell and went out.

A flaming pistol lit the room for a moment. The Ranger could see burly figures and the slanted eye-slits of the hoods. Two more had come inside and another stood in the open doorway. A shotgun roared in the Ranger's direction, and a harsh voice cried:

"Watch it! That load missed my ear by an inch, yuh fool!"

PELLETS rained against the hot stove and wall. The metal protected Hatfield but he could not say just how many enemies might concentrate on him. He sent a quick one at the door and heard a yelp of pain as his bullet slashed home. Bandit Colts blared and the saloon rang with explosions, but his opponents did not like such blind fighting. As he let go again, his lead raging, the pair inside the place quit and ran outside.

"Ramon—Louie!" Hatfield heard them calling, and knew the gang would swarm in after him when they collected.

He fired to rattle them and ran for the back of the saloon. He bumped into a door and shouldered along a wooden wall. Gus Watts had been awakened and was yelling to Pedro.

"What goes on out there?" bawled the fat proprietor.

Hatfield found the rear exit and emerged into the night. The wind bit cruelly for he had left his coat inside, but he ran for the long shed. He had heard no more from Goldy. Robbers would covet such a horse for the sorrel was worth a thousand dollars or more—whatever a man would pay. The Ranger whistled shrill blasts and, as he reached the end of the shed, he heard cursing men and the drum of hoofs. Goldy was fighting his captors.

A lantern burned in the corner and men had a noose tightened on Goldy. A bandanna had been tied around his muzzle to prevent his whinnying. But as Hatfield called, Goldy lashed out and reared. Two masked men hastily swung to confront the tall owner of the golden gelding.

One drew a pistol and cocked it, but before it had risen to the necessary level a Ranger bullet caught the killer square between the slanted eye-slits. The outlaw lead kicked up dirt at Hatfield's feet. The bandit fell heavily, thrown around by the force of the missile which had hit him. The man with the rope dropped it and ran off, hurried by a whistling shot.

Not knowing how many might have run around to the front of the saloon, Hatfield freed Goldy and mounted bareback. He rode off, and none too soon, for the man who had dashed from the shed had fetched others and they surged to the shed. Low over Goldy, Hatfield picked up speed, the wind cutting like a knife.

There was no pursuit. After a time the cold forced Hatfield back toward the buildings. He checked carefully as he approached. A light glowed in the saloon but he saw none of his opponents against its glow. As no horses were in sight he concluded that the gang had fled.

Gus Watts and Pedro were in the saloon. The fat proprietor snuffled nervously as Hatfield slid through from the rear. It was after midnight.

"What's up, Haynes?" demanded Watts. "The shootin' woke me up."

"Bunch of outlaws tried to steal my hoss and wad, Watts," replied the Ranger coolly. "I had to argue with 'em."

"Oh." Watts stared at the tall man. "Yuh ain't hurt?"

"Nope. It was close, though."

Hatfield went to the front and peeked out but his enemies were gone. They had carried off the dead one from the shed and the wounded member of the crew.

"They figgered on stealin' the money I got for my Red River spread," Hatfield said. "Reckon they had spies among the company here last evenin'. Yuh savvy any of the hombres who were here, Watts?"

Watts shrugged his fat shoulders and sniffed. "Most of 'em were waddies from ranches in these parts. I wouldn't know. This is wild country and it's got a bunch of wild hombres runnin' in it." He pushed a bottle and glass toward Hatfield.

The Ranger had decided that his yarn of having sold a big property and being on his way to buy another must have back-fired. Outlaws had learned of his supposed wealth and had come to snatch it. He could not blame Watts, since such a man must keep his mouth shut or pay with his life if he talked too much about his customers. Bandit informers could easily use the saloon as a point from which to spot victims.

He put Goldy back in the shed and returned to his blankets after shoving a table against the front door. For a while he remained alert but there was no further alarm and he dozed off and slept till morning.

The new day was dark and menacing. There was no sun, and while it had warmed a bit the air was penetrating. Pedro cooked a big breakfast while the Ranger and Watts stirred up the fire in the saloon stove.

AFTER the meal Hatfield began rolling his pack.

"Yuh movin'?" asked the saloonkeeper.

"Shore am. I'm on my way to Santa Fe."

Watts shook his big head and snuffled. "Take my advice and stick here. There's a blizzard comin'."

"How do yuh savvy that?" asked Hat-

field.

"I feel it. Catarrh's always worse when it aims to storm."

"I need to go through," insisted the Ranger.

"This is the last stop before yuh cross the mountains," Watts pointed out, "and yuh got a long stretch till yuh hit the first settlements in New Mexico. If yuh want to be caught and froze to death, that's yore business, but don't say I didn't warn yuh."

"I'm obliged. However, if it starts snowin' too hard I'll make for the Double L or some other ranch."

Watts seemed earnest in his warning. Hatfield paid his score and took his leave of Wattsville soon after breakfast.

The wind had abated and it was not so cold riding as it had been the previous day. Goldy had enjoyed a good feed and rest just as his rider had and the sorrel picked up speed after splashing through the ice at the river ford.

The frozen ground did not hold hoofprints so that there was no guessing which way the outlaws had gone. Hatfield kept an eye peeled in case they might be waiting for him to leave the shelter of the trading post.

But the rolling world seemed utterly deserted. Visibility was poor as the frozen grass crackled under the sorrel's beating hoofs. Patches of skeleton trees and brush and bare rocks rose here and there. Then Hatfield reached the confluence of the streams and took the north branch, which should lead to the Double L.

He was two hours out of Wattsville when the wind rose again from a new direction. A heavy gust tore at his body and he pulled up his bandanna and tightened his chinstrap.

"Feels like a blue norther," he muttered.

Stinging particles of grit stung him and the sorrel, as a growing uneasiness took possession of him.

CHAPTER V

Blizzard

AN HOUR later Jim Hatfield knew that Gus Watts had been right. He felt the first snowflakes melting on his brow and saw their shapes on Goldy's gleaming hide before they melted to droplets. They were plainly heralds of a blizzard roaring in from the north.

He was about half-way to the Double L and pressed on with what speed he could. If the snow did not deepen too rapidly he could maintain his bearings by the creek. But a few miles on, it was snowing so hard that he could see only a few yards ahead. The fall was heavy and Goldy had to plough through the clinging white blanket. Once the horse broke through a crust of ice and nearly rolled down the steep bank into the water but Hatfield's skill and luck kept the gelding up.

Heads down to the wind, horse and rider plunged on. Suddenly Goldy veered and stopped, and Hatfield found they had almost run down a man huddled in a blanket at the edge of the river.

"Hullo!" sang out Hatfield.

Deep-set dark eyes peered from the

[*Turn page*]

TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER

split of the blanket. Hatfield got down to see what was wrong and discovered a man who was wide and heavy, a powerful figure in black leather pants and a fur-lined coat. Dark hair showed under his Stetson, and he had a broken nose and a strong, grim mouth. His flesh was bronzed and a crisp mustache adorned his long upper lip.

"I been here for hours," he said hoarsely. "I'd given up hope. Tried to light a fire but everything's soppin'."

He was in such pain he found it hard to speak. Hatfield raised him up.

"Look out!" he cautioned. "I can't put any weight on my right ankle. Hoss busted his leg in a pothole and I got pinned underneath."

He indicated a strangely shaped mound in the snow nearby, clearly where his dead mount lay.

"I'll tote yuh to the Double L," said Hatfield. "We'll ride double. What's yore handle?"

"Dock Snyder."

Snyder was at low ebb. He was too stiff from cold and suffering to help himself and Hatfield had to boost him to the sorrel's back. Hatfield wrapped the man in a dry blanket and poncho and started on.

The jolting motion brought curses of anguish to Snyder's lips and after a time he went unconscious from pain. Hatfield held him before him with one arm while he gripped the reins with his free hand. The pace was slow and the blizzard was increasing in fury.

The deepening snow made it harder and harder for Goldy to progress. Hatfield's arm stiffened as he held up Snyder. The miles seemed interminable and he would have lost direction had it not been for the river line. Men and horse were coated with snow which clung and thickened until a sudden jolt would send wads of it sliding to join the white horror blanketing the world.

Hatfield forgot time and set his teeth as he fought for life. He must reach shelter or they would die, for such a storm might rage for days.

Few men had such physical endurance and strength of mind as Hatfield, but he was at his last gasp when suddenly a high shape stopped him. The wind howled around it and, looking up, he saw a gale-swept roof peak and realized he had run on a small building on the stream bank. It was a spring house, used in summer to keep milk and other foods cool. This must mark a ranch, probably the Double L.

So thick was the air with flying snow that he was unable to make out the main structures, but guessed they must be set back from the river. Turning that way, he soon sighted the bulk of the ranchhouse. It was built of adobe brick and thick timber from the mountain forests. Snow clung to the roof and window niches but here and there the wind kept spaces clean. Smoke billowed black from the chimneys. He could make out the shapes of other structures as he wearily slid from his wet saddle and staggered up onto the veranda.

A man with a brown mustache, heavy shoulders, and a strong body opened the front door as Hatfield kicked it, since he was carrying Dock Snyder in his arms. The rancher's thick brows were together in a questioning frown.

"This the Double L?" asked the Ranger. "We need help, mister."

The man nodded. "Come in."

He looked around and gave a quick nod. There were others in the main room. They were armed and were watching alertly. Now they relaxed. In the background were a woman and a girl and a lad of about eleven.

IN THE stone fireplace roared a blazing log fire and Hatfield carried Snyder to the hearth and laid him out on the rug. He stood warming himself for a minute. Water dripped from his clothing and he began to apologize.

"Makin' a mess here, suh," he said. "Sorry."

"Forget it," said the rancher, and glanced at the woman, a pretty woman with light hair and brown eyes. "Oh, Cora. How about some hot coffee? These gents are most frozen."

She nodded and turned toward the back of the ranchhouse. The girl who had stood at her side was young and slim and, miserable as he was, Hatfield thought she was lovely, with her long-lashed eyes and red lips.

The heat began to thaw him out a bit and he knelt by Dock Snyder, who was stirring and grunting. He helped the

rancher unbutton the sopping coat. To Snyder's shirt was pinned a silver badge with "Sheriff" etched on it.

"I'm Newt Ellington," offered the man who had let the Ranger in. "This is my spread. Yuh're welcome here if yuh need help."

"Thanks. I'm Jim Haynes. I was on my way through to Santa Fe when the blizzard caught me. I picked up this hombre on the river after his hoss broke a leg. I see he wears a sheriff's badge."

Ellington nodded. "Yes, I savvy him. His name is Dock Snyder. He's from New Mexico and collects taxes in these parts."

"Yeah? Yuh've seen his credentials?"

"Shore." Ellington's thick brows rose. "San Miguel, in New Mexico, is near two hundred miles away, but they claim this strip. Snyder showed up this fall and has been hangin' around makin' collections."

A black wallet peeped from the inside pocket of Snyder's opened coat and Hatfield drew it out. Ellington stared as the tall man hastily glanced at documents accrediting Dock Snyder as sheriff and tax collector. One of them read:

> This is to certify that Sheriff Dock Snyder is legally empowered to receive lawful levies on the inhabitants of San Miguel. . . .

"I thought I was still in Texas," said the Ranger, as he carefully returned the papers and put back the wallet.

Ellington shrugged. "This section is a disputed strip, like I said. We figger New Mexico's tryin' to cinch its claim by the new taxes. Snyder had a posse with him and most of us paid, for we try to obey the law. However, we aim to right things in the spring."

Hatfield straightened up. "If yuh don't mind, Ellington, I'll see to my hoss."

"Put him in the barn," said Ellington. "Byler here will give yuh a hand."

"I'm goin' along, Dad," said the eleven-year-old boy eagerly.

"No, Beans, cuss it, you stay inside," ordered Ellington. "Yuh've soaked through three outfits today and that's plenty."

"Aw shucks," growled Beans but he obeyed his father.

A tall, good-looking cowboy with thick light hair and wide blue eyes stepped up, smiling.

"This is Jeff Byler," said Ellington.

Byler and the Ranger went out, rubbed down the golden sorrel and put him in a stable which was crowded with mustangs.

"Weather's tough on stock," observed Byler. "We'll lose plenty of cows if it don't let up soon."

Back at the house, Hatfield drank the hot coffee brought by Mrs. Ellington. The girl, the daughter of the house, was introduced to the guest. Her name was Amanda. Hatfield shook hands with an older son named George, and with the cowboys who were trusted retainers.

"Dock" Snyder was conscious by now, and sitting by the fire. Mrs. Ellington helped the numb victim of the blizzard as he drank the coffee gratefully. Ellington had removed Snyder's boot and it could be seen that his ankle was swollen to twice its normal size, the flesh bruised and blue.

"I don't think it's busted, but yuh got a nasty sprain," declared Ellington. "Yuh'll have to lay up a few days. Yuh can bunk with the men. This storm may last and yuh can't move anyways."

There was a coolness in the rancher's manner toward Snyder and Hatfield guessed it was because of the high taxes which had been demanded. They had been claimed on land titles and water rights and other vital requirements. But such men as Ellington were hospitable and would always help a man in distress.

"Yuh saved my life, mister," said Snyder to Hatfield. "I'm obliged."

"Don't mention it, Snyder. We were lucky to make it."

SNYDER was quiet, but he was ill at ease, perhaps because he was on such an unpopular mission. Ellington preserved a kindly but formal air toward Hatfield also, who had come in with Dock Snyder.

Jeff Byler and the other cowboys quickly became friendly with the tall man, whose size and obvious power were striking. Young Beans Ellington, fascinated by the big stranger, hung close to the Ranger.

The evening meal was soon served for the terrible ride in the storm had taken nearly all day. A plate was carried to Snyder, but the Ranger sat down with the family and hands at the long table off the warm kitchen. They were served by Mrs. Ellington and Amanda.

It snowed all night and was still at it

the following morning. Hatfield and Snyder had slept in the bunkhouse with the Double L cowboys. Snyder could not walk and remained in his bunk. A wood stove kept the snug bunkhouse warm and comfortable.

After breakfast, the Ranger helped the Double L crew shovel paths from building to building. Ellington also wished to try and keep an area of pasture clear near the river so that the steers which had drifted in before the storm might be able to paw out some grass for themselves. There was hay under shelter, and the horses were fed.

Already the snow was too deep to move through. But it kept raging for two days. When Hatfield awoke the second morning at the Double L, the world seemed snowed under. But the storm had stopped and the wind had shifted. The sun was out, gleaming on the white expanse, and water dripped from the roofs.

CHAPTER VI

The Man With the Scar

TALKING with Jeff Byler and Beans, Hatfield drew out quite a bit of information about the country.

"I aim to settle near here myself and start a big spread," declared Byler with a young man's enthusiasm. "There's good water and grass and yuh don't lose too much in the winter if yuh savvy how to run things. Lots of folks are comin' in and land's goin' up in value."

"That's right." Beans nodded. "Dad says the same, Jeff. When yuh hitch up with Sis I aim to live with yuh and help yuh."

Byler's face reddened. "She ain't said yet she'd have me, Beans."

"Shucks, I heard her tell Ma yuh'd asked her. She likes yuh best of all."

Hatfield was secretly amused. Byler was embarrassed and changed the subject quickly.

"Yes suh, this country will open up mighty fast. Lots of new folks plan to come in the spring."

"If yore taxes run so high, though, nobody will want to come," said Hatfield.

"Don't worry. We aim to form our own county and hook up with Texas. In that way we'll see to our taxes. Ellington is rousin' the people to fight against the charges they're makin'. Fact is we're goin' to build us a new town closer to the Double L. Wattsville is too far off for most of us."

"I come through Wattsville on my way over," said Hatfield. "Prices are mighty steep at the saloon and store."

"Shore they are. Gus Watts is cleanin' up. But we'll fix that when we get organized."

"Bunch of masked outlaws tried to rob me over there," went on the Ranger. "Yuh have trouble with outlaws here?"

"Trouble! They're a passel of wolves. In the spring we mean to go after 'em and try to down 'em. They hide in the hills and caves and sally out on us regular. Colonel Rafe Muller, a friend of the boss', was killed at Watts' store not long ago. They steal our cows and mustangs as they please and the trails ain't safe. It's an outlaw paradise because there's no real law in these parts, on account of the border dispute."

"Sheriff Snyder's around," reminded Hatfield.

"Yeah, but Snyder and his men couldn't find the bandits. Yuh can't smell 'em out when they want to stay hid."

Byler told of Colonel Rafe Muller's killing and the scrap at Wattsville, and how the Double L had later been attacked in retaliation for Ellington's brave defense at the store.

Beans' eyes shone as Byler described the fighting. "*Bing-bing!*" cried the boy. "I'd like to tangle with them gunnies again! I loaded for the boys when they hit our ranch."

"He's a brave kid," declared Byler, slapping Beans on the back. "It was all we could do to keep him away from the windows. He wanted to shoot at the outlaws."

"Would you and Ellington savvy any of the bandits if yuh come face to face with 'em again?" Hatfield inquired.

"Only one, for shore," replied Byler. "We grooved him in the fight at the store. He's a little Mexican with a hawk nose and a long white knife scar on his left cheek. I'd swear to him."

"Me, too," thought the Ranger. He had

seen a man of just that description at the saloon in Wattsville.

"Yuh suppose Gus Watts seen this scarred hombre?" he asked.

Byler shrugged. "Mebbe."

Hatfield wondered about Watts. If the owner of Wattsville had recognized the scar-faced Mexican, he had permitted him to sit in the saloon without objection. Of course, a man in Watts' position might not dare to inform against such killers for fear of his life.

"Ellington believes it was more than a holdup," offered Jeff Byler. "Like I told yuh, Muller and my boss wanted to set up a new Texas county here and we figger the outlaws don't want any law so close to their hideouts. Before they shot Muller, one of the bandits said somethin' about it."

This was all grist to the Ranger's mill, and now he had something to look for. If he could find the scar-faced Mexican he would have an important member of the outlaw band in his hands.

IT WARMED after the blizzard and the snow melted down. Stock had drifted in, and shoveling and ploughing with V-shaped wooden shares made at the ranch continued as they cleared spaces for the steers. Loads of hay were tossed out so the animals could survive until they could paw through to the grass. Hatfield assisted at this hard work which occupied all hands.

Dock Snyder, the sheriff from New Mexico, stayed in his bunk for three days. Then he began to hobble about with the aid of a forked stick. Snyder did not have much to say, but Hatfield often found the man staring at him. When the Ranger caught his eye, Snyder would quickly look away.

Hatfield kept his identity to himself. He believed Newt Ellington to be a good man. Yet the Ranger's mission was a delicate one and he wanted to be certain of his ground before exposing his status.

Ellington believed that the ferocious gangs infesting the range had hideouts in the mountain fastnesses south and west of the Double L. Some of these rocky hills were honeycombed with caverns which made ideal spots for such men to conceal themselves.

Eager to move against the enemies of the state and restless at the enforced rest, Hatfield was ready to ride when the snow had melted sufficiently so a horse could move freely. Dock Snyder was still too lame to leave the ranch, and Ellington told the sheriff he was welcome to stay until he could shift for himself.

Snyder, leaning on the top rail of the corral, watched Hatfield one bright morning as the Ranger saddled his golden sorrel.

"Yuh're leavin', Haynes?" asked Snyder.

"Yes suh. I aim to sashay."

"Yuh may find the mountain passes still clogged," warned Snyder. "The sun don't get in there."

"If so, I'll come back," answered the Ranger cheerfully.

Snyder's deep-set dark eyes were fixed on the tall man's bronzed face.

"I'm obliged to yuh," he said soberly.

"Forget it, Snyder. I only done what anybody would."

Hatfield said good-by to the Double L, thanked everybody for their kindness, and rode off. He crossed the river and kept on west, but as soon as a ridge intervened so he could not be seen from the Double L, he swung southward toward the outlaw hills. He desired to familiarize himself with the surrounding terrain.

It was bright and the sun was warming. The light shone on the white expanses but the snow had shaken down and Goldy had little trouble moving through it. The sorrel was as glad to be on the move again as his rider was, for inaction irked both of them.

Hours later Hatfield was close on the mountains. He brought out his field glass and, sitting his saddle, for a long time studied the maze of rocky upthrusts and pine forests on some of the slopes. Tier after tier rose before him. He could not pick out any defined trails, but did note a small torrent which rushed from two high rock shoulders not far from where he sat.

He took care the sun did not reflect from the glass or from any of his burnished metal. Such a flash would be visible for miles to a trained observer. He also kept below the crest of the rise so he would not stand out against the sky in silhouette.

This was true Ranger work. But he was a long way from any reinforcements, alone in a strange territory, and it be-

hooved him to advance continuously.

He moved along and, later, when he was once more studying the terrain, he caught a sudden flash. He was sure it had been the sun catching something bright and quickly trained his glasses in that direction. It had come from the spot where the stream issued out of the rocks.

Watching this, he saw a horseman emerge from the narrow gap, splashing through the stream. Two others had already made the passage and others crowded out, a couple nearly losing their leather seats as their mustangs slipped on the rocks. Hatfield counted twenty of them who rode together in an easterly direction for a time before pulling up for a consultation.

They did not wear black hoods and evidently considered themselves safe from observation. The snow and the deserted wilderness should guarantee that. After a short talk the party split into units, each rider taking a different line, fanning out to cover ninety degrees of the compass from about northeast to southeast.

"Huntin' somebody," mused the Ranger.

ONE of the horsemen was a slim Mexican, although at the distance Hatfield could not make out whether it was the scar-faced man he was after. He concentrated on the rider and thanks to the contours of the land was able to trail the man for several miles. By this time the different members of the band were no longer in contact.

The slender Mexican he had chosen to follow had crossed the stream to Hatfield's side of the water. Lines of brush marked the winding course of the brook but only the evergreens had foliage. The Ranger knew that when he and the Mexican came to open range it would not be possible to travel without showing himself unless he lay back a long distance.

It was also impossible to hide tracks in snow. He picked up speed as the Mexican passed around a sharp bluff on the north bank of the creek. As the Ranger cautiously rounded the turn he saw his quarry had dismounted and was peering into a deep crevice in the bluff.

The squashy sounds the sorrel's hoofs made reached the Mexican and he turned. There was little surprise in his manner and evidently he believed the rider he saw was one of his companions.

As Hatfield came eye to eye with him the whitish scar on the left cheek was clearly outlined.

"He's my man!" the Ranger thought.

And at that instant the Mexican realized that the tall man on the golden sorrel was not of his party. His face twitched in alarm. He had been in the Wattsville saloon when Hatfield had stopped there, and the Ranger was sure the Mexican had been in the gang which had tried to rob him in the night.

Perhaps the Mexican thought the tall stranger had trailed him for revenge because of the attempted holdup.

A brown hand flew to the pearl-handled six-shooter at his hip.

CHAPTER VII

The Captive

HATFIELD'S draw was so fast that his slim hand was only a blur. The hammer spur of his big Colt snapped back under his thumb as the deadly muzzle rose to pin the outlaw. The Ranger had waited purposely because he wished to impress the man.

The Mexican checked his own motion and his hand was glued to his gun stock. His black eyes flamed, then flickered under the cool gray-green gaze of the tall officer.

"Reach!" ordered Hatfield. "If yuh yell I'll kill yuh."

The fellow was the same one he had seen at Wattsville, and who answered the description given by Byler and Ellington. Brown hands slowly rose over the sombrero.

"Keep yore back to me and yore paws up," cautioned the Ranger. "I aim to take yore guns."

"Why you do thees, beeg senor?" The Mexican had found his voice. "You rob me, *si*?"

"No. Yuh're goin' along with me."

The outlaw wanted to fight but dared not for the Ranger had impressed him and he knew the steady Colt could blow his heart from his body. Hatfield came up behind him and pulled the fancy matched

pistols from the pleated holsters. He confiscated the carbine from the saddle sling and located a long knife hidden under the Mexican's trouser leg.

"Lower yore hands now and clasp 'em in front of yuh," the Ranger ordered.

He cut a length of rawhide from his prisoner's lariat and from behind made a small loop. The Mexican was itching to lash out at him but the Ranger was too skillful to offer him any chance. He tightened the loop over the thin brown wrists, ordered the man to mount and secured the free end of the rope to the saddle-horn.

"What you do weeth me?" demanded the captive sullenly.

Hatfield did not reply. He could see the end of a recently healed crease running along the side of the black-haired head, some of it hidden by the hat sweatband. He was certain that he had the man involved in the store fight at Wattsville, and no doubt one of the masked killers who had tried to rob him in the saloon.

He was alert, for it was possible that some of the outlaw's companions might chance through.

It was plain that the prisoner kept hoping for such a break, and his dark eyes moved restlessly.

"Bend down," ordered Hatfield.

The Mexican hesitated but the coldness in the Ranger's voice had him worried. While there was life there was hope and none but a fool would ask for death. He leaned over and Hatfield tied a gag over the angry lips.

A brief search yielded one of the black hood masks. The Mexican had tobacco and cigarette papers, iron rations, plenty of money, and spare ammunition.

Hatfield fasted the prisoner's lariat to the handsome mustang's bridle ring and, mounting the golden sorrel, started for the Double L.

He snaked north as fast as he could, glancing back often, not only to be sure his captive was still secured but that none of the outlaws had picked up the sign. It was impossible to hide horse tracks in the snow.

It was a long run back to the Ellington ranch, and the hours slid away. The sun was low over the Western mountains when the Ranger saw the smoke from the chimneys just ahead. He cocked an eye at the dark cloud bank moving in from the north.

"Yore pards may not be able to track yuh so easy, after all!" he remarked to his prisoner. "It looks like more snow tonight."

The dark eyes glinted with hatred. The outlaw would gladly have killed the tall man.

The clouds moved in swiftly and soon obscured the reddened sun. The temperature dropped and gusts of icy wind knifed them. But the Double L was just over the river now and the Ranger pushed the sorrel through the ford, the Mexican's horse following the pull of the lead rope.

"Hey, there!"

A Double L cowboy, a stocky young man called "Shorty," stepped from behind a barn. He had a shotgun in his hands and had been on sentry duty, for since the attack by the outlaws Ellington kept a guard out day and night.

Shorty had recognized Hatfield, but not who was with the tall visitor.

"Who yuh got?" asked the waddy. "We thought you'd headed for Santa Fe, Haynes."

"I did, but the passes are blocked. This cuss tried to hold me up, so I fetched him in."

"Huh! Mean lookin' rascal, ain't he?"

JEFF BYLER was at work in a yard corral in the last of the daylight. He turned and blinked in surprise at seeing Hatfield, but nearly jumped out of his boots as he recognized the dejected figure on the mustang behind the Ranger.

"Good gravy!" shouted Byler.

The horse he was working on lashed out with a hoof and nearly got him, Byler jumping in the nick of time. He vaulted the corral fence and hurried to stare up at the Mexican.

"That's him!" he cried. "That's the feller we creased at Wattsville!" He sang out, "Boss, Boss, come here!"

Newt Ellington galloped from the stable at Byler's excited calls. Hatfield pushed the gag off the prisoner's sneering lips and Ellington frowned up at the Mexican.

"I couldn't get through the mountain pass," said Hatfield, "and this hombre tried to hold me up. Figgered he's one of yore outlaws and he answers the description yuh give me of the Mexican yuh

fought in the store, Ellington. So I brung him in."

"Good work. That's the man, shore as it's hot below." Ellington was pleased and as excited in his own way as Byler was.

Big flakes of snow began to fall. The world was darkening.

"How about a place to lock him up, Ellington?" asked Hatfield. "Yuh got a spot where he'll be safe?"

"The smokehouse," nodded Ellington. "There's a stove in there, so he won't freeze." He glowered at the prisoner who cursed them earnestly as Byler dragged him from his saddle and started him toward the small building behind the barn.

The smokehouse was built of adobe bricks and had a dirt floor. In one corner was an old, rusted stove and Jeff Byler quickly started a wood fire to warm up the single room. Double L cowboys fixed a straw bed in the place and the prisoner was led inside and his hands were freed. A lantern was brought in and the flickering flame lit the smoke-blackened walls. Hams and sides of bacon hung from the rafters.

The Mexican sat down on the straw ticking and folded his arms.

"You cannot keep me," he snarled, showing his white teeth. "For thees you die!"

"Yuh dirty snake!" snapped Ellington. "Yuh killed my friend Muller. We'll see who dies. Yuh'll stretch rope for what yuh've done." The rancher's anger over the outlaws who had infested the new range was white-hot.

"Why don't yuh think things over," suggested Hatfield to the captive. "Yuh might save yore own neck if yuh help us capture yore pards."

Someone came shoving through the knot of Double L cowboys at the smokehouse doorway. It was Dock Snyder, the sheriff from New Mexico. Snyder was still limping, but in the days he had rested at the Double L his leg had improved and he could move around as he pleased.

"What's all this?" he demanded, stopping by the Ranger. He stared at the prisoner huddled in the corner.

"Caught me a bandit, Snyder," drawled Hatfield. "Ain't he a beaut?"

Snyder scowled at the Mexican. "I savvy him. That's Ramon Gildea. He's wanted for a killin' in Santa Fe!"

Gildea's dark eyes riveted to the sheriff's. He said nothing as Snyder identified him. The white knife scar stood out on his brown cheek and as his hat was off, the healing bullet burn he had taken at Wattsville was plainly visible.

"He's wanted for a shootin' at Wattsville, too," growled Newt Ellington.

Dock Snyder stepped over and kicked Gildea in the ribs.

"Yuh hound! That deputy yuh killed when yuh busted jail was my kid brother!"

Ramon Gildea snarled back profane abuse and Hatfield moved in to check Snyder, but the sheriff did not again attempt to touch Gildea. Instead, he turned to the Ranger and said with a smile:

"Yuh've made a fine catch, Haynes. There's a thousand-dollar reward for Gildea's capture in Santa Fe and yuh've won it. I'll take him back and see yuh get what's comin' to yuh."

"Thanks, Snyder," drawled the Ranger.

A bell rang from the house.

"That's supper, gents," said Ellington. "Let's go. Fred, stick here on guard and I'll send Jake Benson out when he's through eatin' to spell yuh. The prisoner will be fed, too."

A COWBOY, Fred Ames, remained to stoke the wood fire in the smokehouse and watch the captive. The others went to the ranchhouse to eat the hearty meal prepared by Cora Ellington and her daughter, Amanda.

The snow was falling heavily at nine o'clock when the Ranger went out to check up on Gildea. Jake Benson was on guard, swathed in a buffalo coat and with thick mittens on his hands.

"He's snorin'," reported Benson. "Boss put a padlock on."

Ramon Gildea seemed to be safely put away for the night, so Hatfield went to the bunkhouse to turn in. A candle guttered in a glass shield on the rough table and several of the men were in their bunks. Dock Snyder was playing cards with two waddies. When the Ranger entered the bunkhouse, the sheriff glanced up and nodded.

"That cussed Gildea!" he said. "He's got plenty to answer for. I aim to take him back."

"We'll see." Hatfield shrugged. "If it

don't quit snowin', Snyder, we'll be stuck here all winter."

He turned in, weary from the long riding. The snow pleased him for it would cover the tracks left by Goldy and Ramon's mustang in reaching the Double L. After Gildea had been softened up by captivity, thought the Ranger, the outlaw might be willing to talk to the Law and help trap his gang.

CHAPTER VIII

A Matter of Jurisdiction

DURING the night it stopped snowing and the following day was clear. A new white blanket lay over the range but it would not hamper Hatfield for it was only deep enough to hide the breaks in the older snowfall.

As the sun came up, Hatfield had his mission well in mind. He intended to acquaint himself with the various ranchers in the strip and to familiarize himself with the surrounding terrain. By organizing the ranchers properly he might win for Texas. It was already a feather in his cap that he had captured Ramon Gildea, and Newt Ellington was duly impressed. In the same manner he could gain a hold over the other strong-willed, individualistic pioneers and become their leader.

Jeff Byler and others were outside, doing the chores necessary around such a ranch as Hatfield washed in the cold water at the trough and put on a clean shirt. The smell of boiling coffee and frying ham came from the kitchen.

Hatfield paid a visit to the smokehouse before breakfast. A waddy on duty unlocked the door at Hatfield's request. Gildea was catnapping on his rough bed but opened his dark eyes to curse his captor.

"Well, Ramon," began the Ranger. "Sheriff Snyder wants to run yuh to Santa Fe to hang for that killin'. That is, if yuh ever get there. Yuh shot down Snyder's brother and he don't cotton to yuh. Mebbe his gun will slip in the mountain passes."

Gildea sneered. "Who cares for shereef? I am Gildea. One day I keel you." He did not seem at all depressed at being a captive.

"Yuh could save yoreself if yuh'll help us trap yore pards," suggested the Ranger. "Yuh want to talk to me? Why did yuh gun Muller and Ellington that way at Wattsville? It wasn't just robbery. Yuh don't want a new county set up, do yuh?"

Gildea jumped up. His dark face was flushed with rage and he spat at the tall man. The Ranger drew back with a shrug and went outside. He would not abuse a prisoner. He snapped the padlock and strolled toward the kitchen.

"Mebbe he won't be so cocky in another day or two," he thought.

After the appetizing meal, Hatfield went to saddle Goldy. He was tightening the cinches when Jeff Byler approached.

"Say," Jeff said, "Dock Snyder is takin' Gildea back to Santa Fe today. Ellington's turnin' the Mexican over to the sheriff."

"Huh?" Hatfield was startled. "Snyder

[*Turn page*]

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(Adv.)

can't do that. Gildea is my prisoner."

"That's what Ellington said, but Snyder claims him and we can't fight the Law."

Hatfield hurried to the smokehouse. Snyder and Ellington were already there. The sheriff from New Mexico had tied Gildea's hands behind him and was ordering the prisoner to climb aboard his own brown mustang which had been saddled. For himself Snyder had borrowed a Double L gelding, a long-legged black with a star on his nose.

"What goes on, Snyder?" demanded the Ranger.

"I'm takin' this prisoner back to Santa Fe," Snyder said grimly.

"Wait a jiffy—let's talk it over."

Hatfield hunted for arguments. It was a delicate moment, for he did not wish to fight against a neighboring state's peace officer, and yet he would not yield his captive.

Newt Ellington stood to one side, listening and watching. The rancher kept out of it for Dock Snyder had authority and the cowman would not flout it.

"Gildea is wanted in Wattsville for the Muller killin'," went on Hatfield. "That's in Texas."

"The Santa Fe job come first and so do our warrants," pointed out Snyder. "And yuh're in New Mexico right now. I'm sheriff of this county and claim all arrested bandits. Yuh'll get yore reward if that's what's worryin' yuh, Haynes. I guarantee it."

Snyder spoke politely but firmly. The tall man had rescued him by bringing him in during the blizzard and Snyder showed the proper attitude because of this. He voiced it as he added:

"Yuh saved my bacon for me, Haynes. I'll see yuh ain't cheated."

"It ain't that so much, Snyder, as the fact that we may be able to force Gildea to squawk if we hold the cuss here," argued Hatfield. "There's a big passel of outlaws in these parts, as yuh savvy. Gildea's important. He'll draw his pards when we're ready for 'em."

Snyder's frown deepened. "That's it. I reckon I know more about them bandits than you do. They're mighty powerful, and if they ever hit here with all their force they'll wipe the place out. I'd lose Gildea and I don't aim to. He killed my kid brother."

HATFIELD could sense Snyder's iron will as the man showed his strength. Until Gildea had been brought in the sheriff had been quiet and unassuming. His ankle was healing well and he had showed his gratitude to those who had assisted him. But now he was asserting his authority.

"I'm mighty obliged to yuh, Ellington," he said, "for takin' care of me. I'll fetch back yore hoss after I've locked up Gildea in Santa Fe. And I thank you once more, Haynes, for bringin' me in out of that blizzard."

Snyder picked up the reins of Gildea's horse. The bandit slumped in the saddle and his black eyes flamed his resentment at Hatfield, who had caught him.

"Come on, yuh son-of-a-gun," growled Snyder to Gildea. "Wait till yuh feel that rope around yore scrawny craw!"

Hatfield was a fair man and while Snyder's bullheaded determination irritated him, he felt that any sheriff would feel called upon to act as Snyder was doing under the circumstances.

"I'd grab a prisoner myself if I was in his shoes," he mused.

He could not gun it out with the representative of another state's law, for Snyder evidently considered he was entirely right. Besides it was to establish order and proper legal ties that Hatfield had made the long trip from Austin and he did not wish to flout authority as a start. Ellington and most of the other ranchers here had the same feeling, which was why they had paid the high taxes levied. This spelled the difference between an honest citizen and an outlaw who took matters into his own hands.

"Hold up, Snyder," said the Ranger. "Before yuh pull out with Gildea, I want a word with yuh. It must be private."

Dock Snyder stared at him. "All right," he grunted.

Snyder walked his horse to the barn and Hatfield hurried to keep up on foot. The building hid them from the group around Gildea at the smokehouse.

"What is it?" inquired Snyder. He seemed wary, as though he suspected a trick.

Hatfield had decided that there was but one thing to do. He drew out the silver star on silver circle, emblem of the mighty Texas Rangers, which he carried in a

secret pocket against the moment when he must identify himself. By the quick flash in Snyder's deep-set eyes, Hatfield knew that the sheriff recognized the star.

"Yuh're a Texas Ranger!"

"Right. My handle is Jim Hatfield and I'm from Austin, come to smash the outlaws here. I like to work quiet till I'm ready to hit. But yuh've forced me to show my hand. Will yuh keep it under yore hat that I'm a Ranger?"

"Shore will." After a moment Snyder went on, "But I got jurisdiction here, Ranger. This is New Mexico."

"There's doubt as to that," objected Hatfield. "This strip is disputed between the two states. In any case a Ranger won't surrender a prisoner unless he feels it's right, and in this case I don't. I'm hopin' yuh'll act reasonable, for I hate to buck a feller officer. I'll cooperate with yuh in every way and mebbe we can capture the bandits together. So far as credit goes I don't care for it. All I aim to do is see these folks are took care of, and after that they can decide for themselves what they want to do."

Dock Snyder thought it over. He cleared his throat and asked:

"Yuh refuse to hand over Gildea?"

"I got to. I need him as a witness and informer. He'll break if he's held long enough." Hatfield went on, "Yuh see, I caught Gildea because I rode south to hunt the outlaws. I never aimed to go to Santa Fe like I claimed. I saw the bandits come through a water gap down below, so mebbe we can search it later."

FOR an instant the Ranger thought that Dock Snyder meant to fight. He hardened, prepared to make a flash draw to impress the sheriff from New Mexico.

But Snyder's eyes quailed and his big brown hand, instead of dropping to his gun, moved up to his jacket pocket. Slowly he extracted a plug of chewing tobacco. He bit off a chunk and nodded, as his leathery cheek bulged.

"You win, Ranger," he gave in.

Snyder rode back around the barn and Hatfield trailed him. Newt Ellington looked up at the sheriff as Snyder said:

"Gildea stays here, Ellington. No sense in me headin' for Santa Fe without him. I'm going' to Wattsville and try to connect with my boys. I was on my way to meet 'em when the blizzard caught me. See yuh again."

With a nod the sheriff pulled his reins and, turning the borrowed mustang, rode from the Double L.

Silently the men watched the burly officer take the snow-rutted trail which led to the dirt river road to Wattsville. Then Jeff Byler grinned.

"What did yuh say to him, Jim?" Jeff asked. "He shore changed his mind."

"Man to man, he decided Gildea was better off here," evaded Hatfield. "Come on, Ramon, yuh're stayin' for dinner."

He pulled the prisoner from the saddle and as Gildea swore at him, he shoved the bandit into the smokehouse and snapped shut the padlock.

"Keep him there, Ellington," Hatfield ordered. "He'll soften up. I can see it in his eye."

CHAPTER IX

The Disputed Strip

STARTLED, the men whirled about as a shout came from a mounted guard who was watching the surrounding country for signs of the enemy.

"What's up?" demanded Hatfield, as Newt Ellington hurried to the front of his house.

"It's Mark Pettus and some of his riders," explained Jeff Byler. "He's our neighbor to the north and east. A good old cuss though he's got a crusty disposition sometimes."

"What's his brand?"

"The Circle P out here," said Ellington. "He owns a big spread on the Red River and come out here a couple years back to set up another in the strip. He's the biggest land and cattle holder in these parts—got plenty of money."

Hatfield was interested. He had come to help the ranchers, and it seemed as if Pettus would control a sizable force of fighting cowboys who would come in handy if and when he brought the outlaws to bay.

"How many men ride for Pettus, Jeff?" he asked.

"Fifty, in season, they say. Right now he hires around thirty."

Hatfield strolled around to the front porch with Jeff Byler to see Ellington shaking hands with his friend and neighbor, old Mark Pettus.

Pettus had a growth of white whiskers and the hair under his Stetson was thin. His face was wrinkled and weathered by many seasons, but his blue eyes were fully alive, intense and quick. His nose was long and pointed. He was small and shriveled but had a great store of nervous energy. His penetratingly shrill voice dominated the scene. A thick wool sweater was beneath his leather jacket which was not fastened close at his thin neck. He was armed with a brace of ancient horse pistols and a muzzle-loading rifle.

"I rode by to see how yuh'd fared in the storm, neighbor!" he shouted. "Cuss it, I lost fifty head. Howdy there, ma'am. Howdy, my purty one." He waved his hat to Cora Ellington and Amanda as they came forth to greet the visitors. "Newt, that gal of yores gets better lookin' every day. Dog it, I wish I was fifty years younger!"

He laughed at his own jokes and everybody grinned. Amanda flushed at the compliment.

"Light and set, Mark," invited Ellington.

"There's baked ham for dinner, Mr. Pettus," said Mrs. Ellington.

"Yuh make my mouth water," cried Pettus. "Yuh're the best cook in Texas. But we aim to make Wattsville. The boys need to loosen up in the town, such as it is. We'll spend the night and come back tomorrer. . . I wanted a word with yuh, Newt."

The Circle P men lounged easily in their leather seats. They were young and strong and while their employer preferred old weapons, the waddies had the best of arms—Colt revolvers and breech-loading carbines of the newest type. They grinned in amusement as Pettus made himself heard. The old man was a character and they were loyal to him, while in return he offered them a paternal solicitude and affection.

"Have yuh thought over the new county setup?" inquired Ellington. "We hope to have it lined up before spring."

"I shore have, and that's what I have to tell yuh," replied Pettus earnestly. "Before the blizzard I had another visit from that cussed tax collector, Dock Snyder. Yuh savvy that when he first come he handed me a bill for six thousand dollars for land and water rights. Claimed it's back charges and all. Why, they must be loco over there in San Miguel! I told yuh I sent a man all the way to the telegraph station to wire the authorities in New Mexico so's I could check on Snyder. Shore enough the answer come that Snyder is a special sheriff sent here to hunt outlaws and to collect taxes!"

Ellington nodded. "That's one reason I paid up. They didn't demand so much from me, because I don't run as many cows as you do, Mark. What happened last week? Did yuh pay Snyder?"

"No suh! Told him I wouldn't cough up and he threatened to seize my land and cattle. I says, why don't yuh go after them cussed outlaws and act like a peace officer instead of tryin' to bust the decent folks in this strip? That made him rear up on his hind legs."

ELLINGTON looked at him in pleased surprise.

"Then yuh're with us to form a new county?" he asked. "We need yuh. Yuh're the biggest cowman in these parts. We aim to stick to Texas and we'll set our own tax rate and elect a sheriff who'll go after them killers. And we want a tradin' post closer to our ranches where we can buy supplies. Gus Watts overcharges us."

"He shore does." Pettus nodded vigorously. "I've told the cuss so and I will again. What he needs is some competition to fetch down his prices. I'm willin' to donate a quarter section along the river for a town site."

"Pettus refused to join with Ellington and Muller at first," Byler said in a low voice. "He figgered bein' kind of new here he wouldn't raise a fuss, and he's used to takin' care of hisself."

Hatfield knew how fiercely individualistic such men as Mark Pettus were. They resented outside interference and did not want to be bothered. They were cocksure of their own ability to protect themselves. But against the brutal power of the outlaw organization in the strip, one man could accomplish little.

The Ranger stepped closer and Pettus

looked at him with the frank curiosity permitted such an aged and privileged person.

"This here is Jim Haynes, Mark," Ellington said. "He was passin' through when the blizzard caught him. He picked up Dock Snyder whose hoss had broke a leg, and he saved Snyder's gravy."

Pettus scowled. "Huh! If that sheriff had froze solid I wouldn't have busted my heart sobbin'. Yuh're a big hombre, ain't yuh? Where do they grow 'em yore size?"

"I'm from the Red River, suh," replied the Ranger politely. "I'm mighty glad to meet yuh."

"Huh." Pettus turned back to Ellington after looking the Ranger over.

"Haynes also went out and caught him a bandit by the handle of Ramon Gildea," Ellington added. "We got him locked up here."

Pettus glanced back at the tall officer. He seemed more pleased with the second piece of information than with the first.

"Yuh got a salty look, Haynes."

He was a positive character and inclined to patronize younger folks. Outspoken and quick to wrath, Mark Pettus impressed his friends and enemies.

"I'd like to ride a ways with yuh, Mr. Pettus," said Hatfield.

"Why not?" cried Pettus. "The air's free and there's plenty snow for everybody!" He cackled with amusement.

Hatfield went along with the Circle P when Mark Pettus and his boys hit the trail. It was crisp but there was warmth in the rising sun and the men did not feel the cold in their lined clothing. Jests and small talk flew among the young fellows.

Pettus rode at the head of his men and Hatfield stayed near the old rancher. It was his chance to size Pettus up, and it was vital that the Ranger not only acquaint himself with the terrain but the inhabitants of the strip.

Pettus talked of the price of beef and the problems of starting a ranch in virgin country. He was an opinionated man and stubborn as a mule, but he was a pioneer type, the sort of man who had fought savages and all sorts of obstacles to earn a living and make himself powerful.

"It's a mighty fine stretch," he declared, talking of the disputed strip. "There'll be a rush here next spring, see if there ain't. New settlers have come in from all over Texas. That's my State, son. I got four boys, five gals and seventeen grandchildren and I wrote 'em all to come out and make their homes in these parts. I like room and there's plenty in the Panhandle."

They were riding along the north bank of the river which was delineated by lines of brush and small trees, most of them bare of foliage in the winter. Just across the stream the shallow wall of the valley rose in rocky steps to the ridge. Beyond this immediate rise could be seen the escarpment of the Staked Plain and westward and southwestward were the wild mountains where the outlaws had their dens.

The river wound off southeast and the Circle P shortcut over the range. Here and there they sighted bunches of cattle, which had pawed through the snow to get at the frozen grass. The buffalo wintered down through the Panhandle, too, but the deadly guns of professional hunters had cut the great herds to a small fraction of their original strength. Across these plains the Comanches rode in their raids on white settlers as far north as Kansas. Before the Anglo-Saxons had begun their inexorable westward push, the Spanish fathers and the conquistadores had marched through, exploring the New World, the holy men hunting souls to save and the laymen searching for El Dorado.

THE cavalcade paused at a small ranch on a tributary creek of the river. The rancher hailed them jovially, glad to see company, for Pettus was well known throughout the land. The Texas rancher's name was Taylor Woodward and he was a sturdy pioneer type, with a wife and four small children. They had built a home of wilderness materials and started a small herd running, with a couple of his brothers-in-law to help him. Woodward was broad, bearded, and strong and somewhat younger than Ellington or Pettus.

After a rest, the Circle P moved on east for Wattsville. They stopped at the house of another homesteader, Jack Scott. Scott was young, and enthusiastic in spite of the recent blizzard. Pettus talked to him, as he had to Woodward, concerning the

new county that might be organized in the spring.

When the Circle P rode on they sighted the smoke from several other chimneys and Pettus gave the Ranger a good idea of the country and the people in it. The sun was on the decline when they finally sighted Wattsville, and soon crossed the river ford and cantered into town.

Gus Watts rose from a chair when they entered his saloon, and came to greet Mark Pettus and help serve the thirsty customers.

There were several men in the saloon, all strangers to Hatfield.

"Howdy, Watts, howdy," said Pettus loudly. "Set 'em up for my boys. The best ain't too good for 'em. Drink up, Haynes."

The fat proprietor blinked in surprise as he recognized the tall man with Pettus. He stood behind his bar, his hairy hands resting before him and his lips worked, but he said nothing.

"Howdy, Watts," drawled the Ranger. "Yuh were right about that blizzard. I near froze up in it."

"Huh," grunted Watts. He pulled himself together. "I told yuh so. When it come on snowin' hard that night, I says to myself, 'That big cuss wouldn't listen to me and now I'll bet he wishes he had!' "

"I shore did. I bumped into Sheriff Dock Snyder along the way. His hoss had busted a leg and Snyder'd had to shoot him. I fetched Snyder to the Double L. Has Snyder come in yet?"

"Snyder? Yuh mean that New Mexico sheriff?"

"That's right." Hatfield thought that Watts did not seem too bright.

"No, ain't seen him for a week. Some of his men were here lookin' for him. Was he headed this way?"

"He said he was when he left the Double L this mornin'."

Watts was busy for a time waiting on the cowboys. Pettus sank into a chair by a window and sipped his drink. The Ranger wondered where Dock Snyder was. The sheriff must have diverged from the trail to Wattsville, he thought.

The cowboys were starving and Pedro and his Mexican wife and daughter were kept fully occupied for an hour as they cooked steaks and served tamales and other foods. Hatfield and Pettus did full justice to the meal, but there was much on the Ranger's mind.

CHAPTER X

Against Odds

JIM HATFIELD trailed Pettus and Gus Watts into the store when the old rancher went to purchase supplies. In his shrill voice, Pettus began complaining about the high prices.

"Yuh're gougin' us, Watts. Yuh know what? We aim to build a new center west of here and if yuh want to do business with us there yuh'll have to mend yore ways."

"It costs money to freight goods across the plains, Pettus," said Watts.

"We allow for that, but still yuh charge too much."

The mayor of Wattsville kept glancing at the imperturbable Ranger, who slouched on a soap box reading the printed signs around the store—"Try Our New Soap and Die Clean"—"Mother's Liniment for Horse and Baby"—"Our Cheese Stands By Itself." The letters were somewhat smudged and the advertisements were on squares of white cardboard cut from boxes. They looked home-printed. Some attempted obvious jests to amuse the cowboy trade while others simply gave the prices of items.

Hatfield smoked a quirly, apparently not interested in the proceedings. Watts sniffed frantically as he argued with the irrepressible Pettus, who enjoyed needling the proprietor.

"Yes suh, Watts," the old rancher declared, "yuh'll stand on yore hind legs and sing a mighty measly tune next spring when we elbow yuh out."

Seeming not to listen, the Ranger gave his attention to that part of the town he could see, looking through the front window which had been repaired by pasting strips of heavy brown paper over bullet-holes. He saw smoke issuing from the chimneys of the shacks along the single street, and dimly the strains of a guitar came to him. There were a few Mexican girls around and the cowboys had found them.

Back in the saloon, card games and small talk went on for the rest of the winter day, which was short. With the night a cold wind rose and banged the creaky shutters. The cowboys drank and amused themselves, and kept Pedro and his family busy in the kitchen cooking for them. Mark Pettus sat at a table near the stove, warming his old bones. He smiled often, for he liked to see his men have a good time. He could thus recapture vicariously the thrills of his own youth, remembering the good times he had had as a young range rider.

The intense darkness outside, Hatfield noted, was only accentuated by the few flickering oil lamps of Wattsville. But it was too cold for a long ride and without an objective to head for, nothing could be accomplished in the night anyway. In the morning, though, he would start out once more. Winter weather was always a handicap to him, for heavy storms might trap a rider and finish him.

Gus Watts kept eyeing him whenever the stout boss thought the tall man was not looking. Perhaps, thought Hatfield, Watts was wondering why he had come all the way back to the trading post after reaching the Double L on his way to New Mexico.

At suppertime Watts went through the connecting covered passage to the store. His living quarters were in the rear of the emporium. He was gone for about an hour.

Dock Snyder had not come in. The Ranger tried to decide what the sheriff from New Mexico might be up to.

"He may be tryin' to smell out those bandits so as to beat the Rangers to it," mused Hatfield.

There was always some professional jealousy between peace officers from different places, and he did not want Snyder to get ahead of him. And there was no doubt of the sheriff's standing, because Pettus and Ellington had checked on Dock Snyder by wire and had learned that the man was an accredited officer from New Mexico.

"I reckon my next move is to locate the main hideouts of them outlaws," thought the Ranger. "Then I'll organize the cowmen under Pettus and Ellington and go after 'em."

He had lost several days because of the blizzard but he had accomplished quite a bit since his arrival. For one thing he had captured Ramon Gildea who evidently was an important member of the bandit empire. He had made allies of Newt Ellington and, he hoped, of old Mark Pettus. He had gained an idea of the terrain and of the problems faced by its inhabitants.

Next day he would start out fresh. He might have more to go on, too, for Gildea should break down after confinement and reveal some of the gang's secrets.

GUS WATTS came back into the saloon which now was thick with tobacco smoke and the smell of thawing humanity. The Ranger hardly noticed the fat man, so intent was he on his own thoughts.

"How can I use Sheriff Snyder?" Hatfield was asking himself.

Snyder had a posse of sorts in the strip, he had learned. They had headquarters in Wattsville but hospitable ranchers would put them up if need be. The Ranger had not yet met Snyder's men. Perhaps the sheriff and his fighters would come in handy in the showdown in case Snyder was willing to cooperate.

Hatfield had not wanted to reveal his Ranger standing to anyone, but he had been forced to tell Snyder in order to hold Gildea and stave off a fight. But he felt sure that Snyder would keep the knowledge to himself, at least until he, Hatfield, could clean out the outlaws and accomplish his mission before any complications could arise between Texas and New Mexico.

With all these ideas in his keen mind, Hatfield rose and went outside. He led his blanketed sorrel to water and then toward the long shed, intending to make his mount comfortable for the night.

The lantern in the shed was not lighted. But there were mustangs under the shelter and he could hear them stirring and softly snorting. Goldy nuzzled Hatfield's shoulder and sniffed.

"Wait till I make a light, Goldy," the Ranger murmured. "I'll find yuh a warm spot." Protected from the biting wind and with a wool blanket on, the sorrel would fare well.

Hatfield dropped the reins and reached for a match. The tiny flame came up and

caught the sliver of wood. And at that instant a man fell to Hatfield's shoulders from the rafters!

It was a blood-curdling shock. But such was the Ranger's terrific speed that he twisted far enough to avoid the slash of the long knife blade at his eyes. Instead the steel cut through his thick leather jacket and sliced the flesh of his left shoulder.

The match was snuffed out as he fell aside, hurling his assailant from him with powerful arms. But in the brief interval of illumination Hatfield had the impression of two more attackers jumping at him. They wore black hoods with slanted eye-slits! His outlaw foes were after him!

He wore his gunbelts outside his jacket and as he broke his fall with his left hand, he made a lightning draw of a Colt. He fired at the spot where he had seen his attacker.

A flaming pistol snarled back and the bullet kicked up frozen dirt close to his hip. The mustangs, excited by the sudden noise, began rearing and whinnying. Heavy hoofs endangered the Ranger as he rolled off.

A man began screeching in agony as Hatfield let go once more at the flare of the enemy gun. He came up on his haunches and crouched, Colt raised and hammer spurred back under his thumb. It looked like a finish fight now—with the odds all against him!

* * * * *

At the Double L, Jeff Byler had worked hard throughout the winter day. There was plenty to be done and Newt Ellington and his hands labored from dawn till the sun dropped behind the mountains.

The range had to be scoured for stranded cattle. Horses kept in the stables had to be exercised and hay thrown out for animals weakened by the blizzard and unable to forage for themselves.

But Byler was a cheerful soul, and enjoyed keeping busy. He was familiar with all phases of ranching and knew just what to do without supervision. In fact he was fast becoming Ellington's chief standby as the cowman gave him more and more authority.

All thoughts of Arizona had faded from Byler's mind. The Double L had become the one spot on earth where he desired to be and he hoped to remain there, at least until he won Amanda. The lure of the pretty girl had completely subjugated Jeff Byler.

He thought his prospective in-laws, Newt and Mrs. Ellington and the elder son, George, were about as fine as people could be. But Beans was Byler's special crony. The lad shadowed Jeff from before breakfast when they did chores together about the ranch until they turned in at night.

As the youngest child, Beans was permitted a good deal of latitude and his parents and sister were apt to let him have his own way. But he was a good-natured boy and not lazy. He worked steadily with Byler and was a fine rider and able to handle cattle.

BEANS was heavy for his height but he was at a growth point and would no doubt shoot up several inches in a few years, just as his brother had. Beans liked his hair short and he had the large brown eyes inherited by the children from their mother.

Byler enjoyed Beans' company. He tried to watch his language so that none of the oaths common to the range would slip out. But once when a mustang stepped on Beans' toe, Byler realized that Beans had nothing to learn in that line. He had been listening to the barnyard crew, surreptitiously, since he could toddle.

Beans was tremendously interested in Ramon Gildea, the outlaw who had been captured by the tall stranger and locked in the smokehouse. Whenever a meal went out to Gildea, Beans was sure to be there to stare in at the prisoner. The boy was curious about Jim Haynes and admired the big fellow's obvious strength and power.

"I hope I grow that big, Jeff," Beans said time and again. "I'll get me a sheriff's job and go after outlaws every day in the year!"

"I thought yuh meant to live with me," reminded Byler, smiling.

"Well, I will, between fights." Beans was a loyal youngster.

Because of the outlaws operating in the strip and the attack made on Ellington, a guard was maintained day and night. An extra man had had to be put on the smokehouse to watch Ramon Gildea and so they

were short-handed, since the sentries had to be spelled and both reliefs given time to sleep.

After Haynes had ridden off early that morning with Mark Pettus and the Circle P, on the way to Wattsville, the hours had sped swiftly. The only pause was for dinner in the middle of the day. But with all the work, the day came swiftly to a close.

"Night's at hand, Beans," remarked Byler. "We'll wash up soon. I heard yore mother say we got stew for supper."

"Prunes, too," said Beans. "I'm sick of 'em. They make me eat 'em every day."

Byler laughed. "Never mind, Beans. Soon yuh'll be a man and yuh can live on raw meat and cayenne pepper."

The sun had dipped behind the distant blue mountains marking New Mexico, before they were called to supper. Darkness came on and the oil lamps were lighted in the roomy house. Men were seeing to their horses, rubbing them down and preparing feed for the horses in the stalls.

The supper bell rang, its clear notes a welcome sound to the hungry cowboys. Jeff Byler stopped at the trough to wash up and caught Beans by the coattail as the boy passed.

"Clean up, Beans," he ordered.

"Aw, shucks!"

But Beans washed his face and hands sketchily and shared the long towel with Byler. Already Jeff Byler was beginning to be a good influence.

CHAPTER XI

Rescue

IT WAS a small ranch, the Double L, and the hands were treated as members of the family. They ate at a long table and Amanda and her mother waited on the hungry workers as they filled themselves with appetizing viands.

Tonight there was a big iron kettle of hot stew, filled with tender chunks of beef, potatoes and onions, and dumplings. It melted in the mouth and the hearty young fellows did full justice to it. Coffee and home-made bread, molasses, and prunes filled out the meal.

Newt Ellington sat at the head of his table. His wife and daughter joined them when all had been served, and Amanda smiled at Byler.

"Is it good, Jeff?" she asked.

"Yes'm, it's wonderful!" he enthused. "I never tasted such cookin'."

The Ellington women liked to be complimented on their skill and Byler was quite right when he told them the supper was good.

While they ate, a waddy rode constantly around the ranch watching for the enemy. At the smokehouse another guard stamped his booted feet on the snowy ground in an attempt to keep his toes warm.

The crew were half-way through their meal when a hoarse cry rang out, followed by the heavy *whoosh* of a shotgun.

"Outlaws!" yelled a guard. "Watch it, Double L!"

Ellington leaped to his feet and, running to the rack, took down his loaded rifle. "That's Jerry callin'!" shouted the rancher. "Come on—the bandits are here!"

Jeff Byler was already up and the other cowboys kicked back their chairs as they jumped to the fray to protect the ranch. Colts and carbines appeared in steady hands as they rushed to the yard after Ellington.

Jeff Byler found Beans right at his heels. The boy had brought his own light rifle and was headed for the thick of it all.

"Beans, you get back in there and lie low!" ordered Byler.

"Aw, shucks, Jeff," panted Beans. "I want to be in on the scrap!"

"No!" Byler frantically sought an argument that would satisfy Beans. "Yore mother and sister need to be pertected."

"All right," Beans gave in, at that. "I'll go back."

Byler rushed on. Ellington and the boys were hurrying between the back wing of the house and the stable. A rider dashed up. It was Jerry Gale, the Double L waddy on guard.

"Boss, there's an army of hooded outlaws comin'!"

"How many?"

"I lost count! They're almost on us!"

Byler felt the sweat in his hand as he gripped his Colt six-shooter. His heart pounded with excitement but he fought

to maintain a cool front. His was a courage which would never quail before an enemy.

With Ellington in the lead, the Double L passed the barn and bunkhouse—and a fearsome sight met their eyes. Against the pale light of the moon which was coming up a moving line of horsemen in black hoods was silhouetted against the snow. There were forty or fifty in the attacking gang. At sight of the Double L men they threw up their weapons and opened fire.

The rattling crackle of guns filled the cold night air. A cutting wind which had come up at sundown added to the confusion.

The Double L opened up on the approaching outlaws. Lead was thick in the air, but the bandits were moving fast, firing as they came on.

"Shorty!" bawled Newt Ellington, trying to make himself heard over the din.

Jeff Byler suddenly remembered "Shorty" Finch, who was on duty at the smokehouse. The smokehouse lay some yards past the bunkhouse and stables and the ravening killers were headed straight for it.

Shorty came tearing around the far end of the bunkhouse on his way to the safety of the adobe house. He was between the outlaws and the ranch crew, and a blast of fire from the mounted attackers caught him hurling him to the ground. Byler darted forward to pick him up, but Shorty was dead.

Newt Ellington seized Byler's arm.

"Inside, boys!" ordered the boss. "Hustle!"

THE surge of the outlaws could not be checked. The Double L would all die if they stayed in the open against such odds. They fell behind the bunkhouse, firing as they retreated. Jeff Byler felt the burn of a bullet through his sleeve. A waddy swore as he was staggered by a chunk of lead. A puncher supported him as they made for the kitchen door.

Quickly they withdrew inside the thick-walled house and the lights were at once ordered blown out. They barred the doors and fighters took stands at the windows so that the attack might be stemmed.

Byler crouched by a rear kitchen window, peering from the corner of it.

"They're over by the smokehouse, Boss!" he called.

"They're goin' to rescue Gildea," growled Ellington. But he didn't seem to care too much, stricken as he was by Shorty's death.

However, he had his family and the rest of his crew to think of, so he gave swift orders for defense. In the darkened house, the Double L braced for the attack. There was a long delay and the tension mounted until Byler felt it could be cut with a knife. Sweating hands gripped the stocks of six-shooters and rifles as the defenders waited for the shock of the battle.

"Here they come!" said Ellington at last.

Gunfire opened with a blast and the bullets tore through the windows to bury in the opposite walls. But the people inside kept away from the openings and bobbed up to shoot back at the dark figures moving about the house. The outlaws rode circle on the building, pouring lead in.

The men inside fired carefully, taking aim each time. The targets were shifting and hard to hit but Jeff Byler, for one, knew that he had cut one or two of the sinister horsemen and that the other Double L defenders were as good shots. The bandits had already had a taste of trying to rout the Texans from their fort and after a few volleys, the masked riders turned and galloped off into the night.

"Wait a while," ordered Ellington, "till we're shore they've gone. They may be hopin' we'll run out."

But the outlaws had left the vicinity, as they found when they did leave the house a little later, and began to check up. The smokehouse door had been broken in with an ax and Ramon Gildea had been rescued by the owlhoot band. Two Double L cowboys had been slightly wounded, but only Shorty had been killed.

Ellington, Byler and the rest were busy about the grounds as they checked up, while Amanda and her mother attended to the wounded men. Lamps had been lighted in the kitchen and there was plenty of hot water, as there always was, on the big stove.

"Oh, Beans!" Mrs. Ellington, in the kitchen doorway, called to her younger son. "You come in here at once." There was no reply and she asked Jeff Byler who was on his way back to the house, "Jeff, have you seen Beans? Has he been with you?"

"No, ma'am. Come to think of it I ain't seen him since I sent him back inside before the fight started."

Byler was not alarmed for Beans was always busily running around.

"I'll see can I find him," said Jeff.

He went around to the smokehouse but Beans was not there. The lad was not with his father and as the Double L men returned to the house it was found that no one had seen Beans during the battle.

Mrs. Ellington grew worried. She threw a coat around her shoulders and started out. They heard her calling "Beans! Beans, where are you?" as she made the rounds of the ranch.

Ellington lighted lanterns and all the men began a hunt for Beans. There was no answer to their calls and no sign of the boy. They hunted through every nook and corner of the buildings, thinking that he might have been hurt or possibly had fallen asleep in the hay mow after the excitement had abated.

Mrs. Ellington was in tears and Byler was tortured as he saw Amanda weeping. The stricken look on Ellington's bronzed face cut him to the quick.

ELLINGTON cornered Byler at the smokehouse as Jeff returned to have a last look at the place which had been such a center of attraction to Beans.

"Well?" said Ellington harshly. "What do yuh think, Jeff?"

Byler was silent.

"Go on and say it," ordered Ellington. "The bandits caught him and carried him off. We thought he was safe in the house and if he yelled it was drowned out in the shootin'."

Byler nodded. He had never felt so miserable in his life. The idea of Beans being in the hands of the hooded killers was torture.

"I'm goin' to saddle up and scour around for him a ways," he said.

Ellington held himself stiffly, and his grim face was set. He turned away, going toward the kitchen, where his sobbing wife mourned the loss of their son.

His heart torn, Jeff Byler saddled a mustang and, with several other cowboys, moved out in a forlorn hope of being able to find Beans somewhere on the range. The snow crunched under the shod hoofs and the biting wind made the riders hunch over their mounts. Bushes and rocks cast black shadows on the white expanse and they could see thousands of hoofmarks, made not only by the outlaw horses but by Double L stock which had collected near the buildings after the storm.

Feeling frozen to the bone, the cowboys rode for miles, but were forced to turn back at last, the search fruitless.

Byler talked it over in the bunkhouse with the men as they tried to warm up after the night ride.

"I hate to think of Beans with them killers, boys. He's a mighty good kid."

"He shore is." Ned Roberts nodded. "I don't believe they'll hurt him, Jeff."

"No, they ain't apt to, once they've captured him. But they'll do worse, boys. They'll try and teach him their ways and he's only a little feller. That sort of outlaw polecat likes nothin' better than to catch a kid and ruin him by turnin' him into a bandit. It's been done before and will be done again."

There was no argument. Every man there knew of such cases, where children had been snatched from their homes, either by Indians or white raiders, and set in evil ways.

Byler finally lay down in his bunk, determined to sleep. When the dawn came he intended to saddle up and start hunting for Beans. He would die if necessary in his attempt to save the boy.

CHAPTER XII

Attacked

MEANWHILE, in Wattsville, Jim Hatfield was fighting against his masked enemies at the shed.

His swift defense and blinding speed had saved him in the first few moments of the melee. His crashing lead had struck home, and running feet shook the earth as his foes ducked around the end of the shed.

The Ranger jumped up to follow. A bullet cut the corner and a splinter stung his cheek. He could feel the warm blood flowing from his shoulder wound, down inside his clothing. They had tried to dispose of him quietly with a knife but his

alertness had prevented that.

He dashed wide around the building, hoping to pin them against the light from the saloon. They were not mounted and he could not see his attackers. But as he glanced toward the saloon he did see a man in a black hood standing at a rear window, aiming a rifle through the glass.

The drygulcher was plainly about to kill someone inside and Hatfield hastily whipped his Colt into line, firing to defeat the masked killer.

He knew his bullet had hit or at least come close to it for the outlaw outside the window jumped just as the heavy rifle exploded. The hooded drygulcher scurried around the corner as the Ranger went tearing in.

Confused shouts came from the saloon. Guns flamed in the cracked window as Hatfield moved past the rear door. It was burst open and Circle P men crowded through, pistols raised to fight. A couple of deadly slugs sang within inches of the Ranger.

"Hold it!" panted Hatfield. "Yuh're gunnin' the wrong man!"

"Stand or we'll blow yuh wide open!" bawled a waddy.

Mark Pettus pushed through the group. "One of my boys is dead!" howled Pettus. "Who fired that shot through the winder?"

"A masked outlaw, Pettus!" called Hatfield. "I'm after him. I'm losin' precious time chewin' the fat with you."

Pettus scowled, seemed unsure of his ground. He looked up into the rugged face of the big Ranger, then turned on his heel and went back into the saloon. The cowboys were silent as Hatfield went on around the corner.

The drygulcher had had plenty of time to hide. While the cold wind howled in Hatfield's ears he listened for sounds of retreating hoofbeats but heard nothing.

"They must be hid in one of the shacks," he decided.

He hurried back to the saloon, determined to make a search. Mark Pettus was kneeling beside the body of his young rider.

"Dinny's done for," Pettus moaned bleakly. His old face was purple and fury caught at his throat. The sight of the vigorous, clean youth cut off in his prime drove the old man frantic. He jumped up and began to rave and curse. "I'll skin the man alive who done this! Missed me by an inch, but I wish they'd hit me instead of Dinny!"

The Ranger sought to figure it out. "They were after Pettus," he guessed. "They tried to knife me at the shed while the hombre at the winder had a bead on the old cuss."

Pettus, he was thinking, had thrown in with Newt Ellington, and the outlaws had killed Rafe Muller for just that, seeking Ellington's life at the same time.

Gus Watts stood behind his bar, snuffling frantically. He pointed at the tall man.

"Pettus," he cried, "I seen that big galoot outside the window! He must have done it."

"Did yuh shoot my boy?" snarled the old rancher, whirling on Hatfield. "Cuss it, I seen yuh out there myself, Haynes!"

Pettus had a Colt half-raised. Hatfield coolly regarded the infuriated cowman, who was in a terrible state.

"Hold yore hosses, Pettus," he said sternly. "I told yuh I didn't gun yuh. Somebody was aimin' to kill yuh through that window and when I fired at him it wrecked his aim and he hit Dinny. I got a knife slash in the shoulder where a couple more outlaws jumped me in the hoss shed."

He pointed to the cut in his jacket, from which blood had run, so that Pettus could see for himself.

Turning on Watts, the Ranger said coldly, "Yuh should savvy better than to go off half-cocked that way, Watts. Yuh saw me outside but I was chasin' the killer. Now hand me a lantern so's I can search the shacks. Hustle!"

THE Ranger's gaze met the stout mayor's light eyes. Watts' jowls shook and his face was fiery. His snub nose twitched as he snuffled. Hatfield was astonished at the enmity and hate in the saloonkeeper's baleful stare. He had heretofore considered the mayor of the trading post to be a stout, easy-going rascal, cheating on prices perhaps, but otherwise harmless.

He took a step toward Watts, his gray-green eyes darkening as Watts bristled. A brace of Colts hung from a wooden peg just at Watts' hand.

Then Watts dropped his eyes, turned

and reached, not for a gun but for an unlighted lantern ringed on another peg.

"Why has he got it in for me?" wondered the Ranger, though it was possible that Watts really believed he had shot Dinny through the window.

Eager to continue his search, he pushed up the lantern frame and struck a match, touching it to the blackened wick. The flame came up and he dropped the chimney, adjusting the light to the proper height.

He glanced around the saloon. Pettus was scowling at him and the old man's waddies stayed where they were. Watts had both fat, hairy hands on the wet bar. Colt in one hand and lantern in the other, Hatfield hurried through the front door but none of the cowboys went along.

He crossed to the shacks. Some were lighted. The dirt road was frozen and he began to check up on the small buildings around the trading post. Fifty yards from the saloon stood a dark little cabin, chinked with mud against the wind. The door was shut, but the lantern's circle of light showed some brownish spots in the snow outside.

Men and animals had beaten down the snow in the street and sun and wind had helped complete the clearing job, but where it had laid undisturbed the snow had melted down and frozen so that the fresh stains were easy to see.

"Blood on the snow," muttered the Ranger.

He stood to one side to kick in the door. But no fire came as he raised the lantern at arm's length so the beam would shine into the shack. The single room held a wood-burning stove, a couple of rough wall bunks, a bench and crude table made from half a barrel. In the middle of the floor lay a fierce-looking unwashed and bearded big man in black leather, with one of the cloth hoods clutched in a dirty hand.

A Colt lay by his hand but he was too weak to raise it.

Blood pumped through a ragged hole in his heavy coat, and a pool of it had formed at his hip.

The Ranger stepped in with levelled Colt.

"I've seen yuh before," he growled. "Yuh were in the saloon the first night I pulled in here. What's yore handle? Yuh travel with Ramon Gildea and his gang, don't yuh?"

The clenched teeth were stained by tobacco juice.

The outlaw writhed in agony and Hatfield heard him gasp:

"Cuss yuh, *Ranger!*"

Hatfield was startled. He had told only Dock Snyder that he was a Texas Ranger, yet this bandit knew it. There was a chance that the gunny had guessed it or had perhaps seen Hatfield at some previous time, but this was slim.

The wild wind brought the clop of galloping hoofs. Hatfield sprang to the door but could not spy the retreating riders hurrying out of Wattsville. He returned to the dying outlaw. "Yore pards have ditched yuh. They're yeller like all their kind."

Hate flamed in the burning eyes. Such men feared and loathed the Rangers above everything else. The gunny shuddered and relaxed as all emotion forever fled from him.

Hatfield went through the dead owlhoot's pockets. Outside of money, tobacco and papers and the usual small belongings a man might carry, he found nothing. He thrust the black hood in the back of his own cartridge belt.

Unbuttoning his jacket, the Ranger brought out the silver star on silver circle, emblem of the Texas Rangers, and pinned it to his chest.

"If you savvy, all yore pards do," he muttered, frowning down at the dead killer.

He was sure they had tried to dispose of him because they had found out he was a Ranger. There was no longer any profit now in hiding his identity, since his enemies knew it.

He stalked back to the saloon, swinging the lantern.

WHEN the big Ranger entered, a silence fell. Gus Watts had left the bar and was sitting with his head close to Mark Pettus'. He had been talking earnestly to Pettus but stopped short when Hatfield came in. Dinny was stretched on the floor, half covered by a coat.

On the table before Pettus and Watts lay a large square white paper. It had black printing on it but the Ranger

could not read it from such a distance.

The lamplight caught the silver star and circle and glinted from the famous badge of the Rangers. Everybody saw it, but still no one spoke.

"Pettus," Hatfield said quietly, aware of the suspicion in the old rancher's look, "I'm Ranger Jim Hatfield, here from Austin to go after the outlaws who are raidin' yore range and killin' yore friends. I like to work quiet but the bandits savvy who I am. One of 'em—I believe the man who shot Dinny—is lyin' up the way in a shack."

"Take him, boys!" shouted Mark Pettus, leaping up and pulling a Colt. "That cinches it!"

TWO big cowboys stood close to Hatfield at the front of the bar.

Watts had brought along his Colts and threw one up to fire, but the Circle P had jumped in.

Hatfield dared not allow himself to be disarmed under such circumstances. He smelled rats, and Pettus was a mulish, stubborn old fellow.

Once Pettus got an idea in his head it was hard to beat it out.

Ed Blocker, a stalwart Pettus waddy, reached for Hatfield and grasped him by the left shoulder, wrenching at him. It hurt the Ranger's wounded arm and Hatfield twisted off, ducked and hit Blocker in the jaw with his fist. Blocker staggered and "Buck" Healy, another tough Circle P man, swore hoarsely and raised his pistol to fire.

Pettus and Watts were down the room while other cowboys leaped toward the fray. Hatfield had only a couple of seconds in which to escape or quit. His slim hand blurred as he whipped a long-barreled Colt and slapped Healy across the side of the head with the steel bludgeon. Healy folded up and Hatfield whirled for the door.

He fired but kept it high, meaning only to shake them all. A couple of heavy slugs drove into the wall, missing the Ranger by inches. Then he was outside in the biting night.

Howls and explosions came from the saloon. Pettus' shrill voice could be heard above the din.

"Get him! Shoot him down! He's a killer!"

CHAPTER XIII

Search

YELLING, and throwing up their weapons as they ran, cowboys dashed out the front door of the saloon after the fleeing Hatfield, who was handicapped since he did not wish to kill or seriously injure any one of them, while they were set on taking him, dead or alive. He ducked around the corner of the building as they spied his tall figure against the light from a window. Bullets shrieked behind him as he ran as fast as he could toward the shed.

A slug whipped past his face. He glanced toward the back of the saloon and saw that Gus Watts, Pettus and a couple of Circle P waddies had come that way to cut him off. They had sent the shot from the new direction. Watts fired once more, a close one. Then Pettus tried for him.

The Ranger swerved as they all ran toward him. Shrill whistles came from his lips, calling the golden sorrel. Goldy would come at this signal.

Firing only to hold his pursuers back, Hatfield ran down the road which led out of Wattsville. In the night the shacks gleamed with yellow lights and he could hear the excited yelling above the roaring wind. A golden shape appeared and the beat of hoofs was music to his ears. The sorrel ran up and the Ranger hit leather. He rode off at full speed, followed by the curses and wild lead of his assailants.

He left the trading post behind, splashing across the river ford. His shoulder ached and, as the sweat dried after his exertions, the biting air penetrated his clothing. He pulled his bandanna up over his mouth to get some protection for his cheeks and found his earmuffs in his saddle-bag.

"We got a long run, Goldy," he muttered, glancing over a hunched shoulder at the receding glow of the trading post. "It's a cinch we ain't welcome in Wattsville tonight. I'd like to savvy what made Pettus turn on me like that! I aim to find out. Watts has it in for us, but why?"

Several mysteries had been added to the list of problems he must clear up.

But first he must save himself. The temperature had dropped and the wind knifed through him. The Double L was the only place where he was sure he could go to get warm, and to dress his knife wound.

It was going to be a tough ride in the night. . . .

The brittle leaden dawn found Hatfield close to the Double L. The golden sorrel had brought him through and the horse was warm enough, for the exercise prevented the cold from taking hold.

But the man was stiff with suffering. He slumped in his saddle and could not move his left shoulder. It felt numb and he thought that his nose and fingers might be frosted for they had lost all sensation.

In the gray light the Ranger moved into the yard. A mounted cowboy challenged him, carbine leveled, then recognized the horse and Hatfield's bowed figure.

"Haynes! What's wrong?"

"Where's Ellington and Byler?" the Ranger asked huskily.

"Saddlin' up."

Hatfield rode to the corral and stable. Newt Ellington, Jeff Byler and three more Double L men were cinching up.

The Ranger had trouble getting down for his limbs were as stiff as boards from the cold. In the faint dawn the faces of the Double L men looked grim and ashen.

Hatfield stamped his booted feet but could not slap his arms much since his left one was helpless.

"Haynes!" cried Byler, dropping his reins and coming to peer into the tall man's face. "Yuh're plumb done in."

"Where yuh bound?" demanded the Ranger, his voice thick.

"A terrible thing's happened," explained Byler. "The outlaws hit us after dark last night and killed Shorty Finch. They rescued Gildea. But that's nothin' compared to what else. They snatched up Beans somehow and carried him off!" Byler's voice broke.

"The kid!"

HATFIELD sought to face these stunning blows. He knew only too well what outlaws would do with such a fine young boy as Beans Ellington. They would make him one of their band and teach him, at his impressionable years, the deadly game in which they indulged.

"How did they get their hands on Beans?" he muttered.

"We ain't shore," answered Byler, face drawn in distress. "We figger Beans must have run out to fight. He's hard to hold back, yuh savvy. And they took his gun and mebbe gagged him when they run off. We had a hard fight and didn't miss Beans till they'd gone."

"And Gildea? Yuh say they rescued the cuss?"

"That's right. They must have come for that. Somehow they heard we had him."

Hatfield fought for clarity of mind. "How could they savvy it so quick?" he asked. "The trail was hid by that snowfall. Did they hunt for Gildea, or did they know right where he was?"

"They moved straight to the smokehouse," said Newt Ellington. "They knowed Gildea was in there."

"Huh! Any of yore men leave the ranch yesterday, Ellington?"

"No. We worked close in. Why?"

The suspicion which had been aroused in the Ranger increased and suddenly crystallized.

"Dock Snyder!" he drawled. "He didn't go to Wattsville like he said he was. I guess he sent one of his pards there while he hustled to find his gang. He's the only man who could have known of Gildea's capture and brought a rescue force in such quick time. Yuh say they savvied just where Gildea was locked up, too. Has Snyder been around since he rode off?"

"Nope, we ain't seen hide nor hair of him," answered Byler.

Ellington shook his head, disbelievingly. "But Snyder's a peace officer. We checked on that. Why should the sheriff do such a terrible thing?"

"That's the puzzle."

Hatfield had saved Snyder from the blizzard. But somehow Dock Snyder had fooled him along, as he had the ranchers of the strip.

The Ranger was teetering on his feet. First he needed hot food and drink. He must rest and attend to his hurts.

The light was rapidly coming up when Ellington said:

"Ain't that a Texas Rangers star yuh're wearin', Haynes?"

"Right. And my handle is Jim Hatfield. Cap'n McDowell of Austin headquarters had yore complaint and sent me here.

But the Rangers don't seem welcome in the strip."

Ellington did not comprehend the faint irony in Hatfield's words. His mind was on the loss of his son.

"Yuh're welcome at my ranch, Ranger. Yuh better go in the kitchen and thaw out. There's hot coffee on the stove and my wife will gladly give yuh breakfast. We aim to try and trail the outlaws who stole Beans. Got to leave some of the crew to guard the women, though."

"If yuh'll give me a couple hours I'll go with yuh," offered Hatfield.

But Ellington was frantic. He was trying to hide his fear over Beans' fate under a stern mask but his gloved hands shook and his face twitched. "You take it easy and get in shape, Ranger," he said. "But tell me just where it was yuh captured Ramon Gildea. It might be a spot to try."

Hatfield described the water gap from which he had seen the outlaws emerge.

"But I doubt if yuh'll find any of 'em there, Ellington. I told Dock Snyder where I'd arrested Gildea and of the possible hideout and the gunnies may keep away from that den. They outnumber yuh ten to one, besides. Be mighty wary."

"We will. We'll need help to smash Gildea's gang, but we got to move."

The few Double L men mounted and rode off and Hatfield walked on stiff legs to the kitchen. He paused, and through the kitchen door could hear the sobbing of the women. But he was in dire need of warmth and help and he knocked, lifted the latch and went in.

Cora Ellington greeted him. Her eyes were red, and Amanda's pretty face was streaked by tears.

Mrs. Ellington seemed glad to have something to take her mind off her grief. She made him bare his injured shoulder and cleansed the wound with hot water. After a time Hatfield was able to raise his hurt arm. Amanda brought him coffee, and food was in the pot.

He was thawing out and while he ached here and there and his shoulder pained, he soon was able to relax. He had no grave wound and after the hot meal and a smoke, sleep tugged at his weary eyes.

GEORGE ELLINGTON, who had been left in charge at the ranch, showed him a cot in a side room and he covered himself with a blanket, lying stretched out on his back. . . .

The next thing Hatfield remembered the winter sun palely shone through the single window. By its low position in the sky he knew it must be late afternoon. The thud of hoofs in the yard sent him to the window, his Colt in his hand.

It was Ellington, Byler and the other Double L men coming home, worn from the day's riding.

"Newt, did you find him?"

Hatfield heard and saw Beans' mother as she ran from the kitchen door to greet her husband. But from the depressed look of the men the Ranger knew they had had no luck.

He flexed his left arm. The wound had stopped bleeding and his shoulder was stiff but felt better. Some of the aches had left him and he was again hungry.

In the kitchen he poured himself some coffee, since Amanda and Mrs. Ellington had gone out into the yard. Ellington, Byler and the boys came trooping in after a time.

"We found that gap yuh described," Ellington informed the Ranger. "We scouted it careful, then went through. Located a big cave where no doubt some bandits must hang out but it was empty, except for supplies and blankets. We couldn't pick up any clear, fresh trail, for they'd split up into several parties."

CHAPTER XIV

Renegade Lawman

NIGHT fell, brittle and icy. Hatfield ate and rested at the Double L, and talked over the dangerous situation in the strip with Newt Ellington.

"All I know about Watts," replied Ellington, to Hatfield's query, "is that he overcharges us. Of course he's got a good thing in that store and saloon and owns big chunks of the land near it. There's no doubt outlaws trade there but we never held that against Watts. He would be shot down if he refused to sell to such hombres."

"Yore plan to build a new center must rile Watts," suggested Hatfield.

"Mebbe. But we told him he could open

a branch there if he'd treat us right."

"He'd lose his hold and a fortune if he had to move," said the Ranger. "How did he act the time Colonel Muller was killed?"

"He acted scared silly. Scrunched up and begged for mercy. I was excited at the time but I remember that."

Cowboy sentinels spelled one another throughout the cold night.

Another long sleep in a warm bed restored Hatfield so that he felt like himself again when the day broke sunny and milder. His left shoulder was stiff but limbered up when he worked it for a time.

Mark Pettus did not stop at the Double L on his way back from Wattsville. The Circle P was a two-hour run northeast of Ellington's and no doubt the peppery old rancher had headed direct for home after leaving the trading post.

The sun had lost its red morning hue and had paled to a light golden disc in the eastern sky when word came in from the outrider on guard that men were approaching. Hatfield was out in the yard with Ellington and Byler.

"It's Sheriff Dock Snyder and six of his tax collectors," reported "Red" Ince, a Double L waddy.

Ellington cursed, remembering the suspicions voiced by Hatfield against Snyder. The Ranger gripped the rancher's arm.

"Careful, Ellington! This is a break for us. I was wonderin' if Snyder would have the iron nerve to come back here. He wants to find out what goes on and he may be huntin' for me."

He could feel Ellington shaking. "If he had anything to do with takin' Beans," growled the father, "I'll rip his hide off with my bare hands!"

"Shore yuh will. But yuh'll scotch yore chance if yuh show suspicion. Let me handle Snyder. Just tell him that Beans was run off and that Gildea was rescued by his pards. Act stricken, just as yuh have been doin'. . . . Jeff, you warn the boys to keep shut while Snyder's around."

Byler hurried to tip off the Double L crew. Now they could see Dock Snyder, followed by half a dozen leather-clad horsemen, coming slowly over the rise. The sun glinted on Snyder's badge of office and his men had tin stars pinned to their shirts.

Hatfield had quickly picked up a wagon post, a thick length of hickory used in steadying loads on big vehicles. He leaned on it and as Snyder pulled up, facing them, at a few yards distance, the Ranger slumped on his right hip and a woebegone look twisted his rugged face.

"Howdy, Double L!" sang out Dock Snyder, his men lined behind him.

They were watchful and their weapons were ready. Snyder was leading the black gelding with the star on its nose. The Double L horse followed him on a lead rope. Two other horses were led by the party, and they were packed with lashed, tarpaulin-covered loads.

"Hello, Sheriff!" said Hatfield.

He limped painfully toward Snyder who stared at him as the Ranger barely managed to negotiate a few steps.

Ellington raised a hand in salute. His face was grim and drawn. Jeff Byler returned and waved to the visitors.

"I see yuh're wearin' yore Ranger star," remarked Dock Snyder. His deep-set eyes drilled the tall officer, searching for information. As the Double L did not appear to be on the prod, Snyder slowly came closer. "What hit yuh?" he asked, as Hatfield lurched and swore.

"Bandit lead," explained Hatfield. "I had a scrap in Wattsville with a bunch of hooded gunnies, Sheriff. Hit me in the shoulder and in the leg. I believe they nicked the bone, for I can hardly put any weight on my left foot. It'll be a week before I can fork a bronc."

"That's tough. I didn't make Wattsville, after all. Met my posse and we struck off into the hills to hunt outlaws. Ellington, I fetched back yore mustang. I'm obliged."

"Don't mention it." Ellington's voice was thick.

HATFIELD spoke on quickly, to cover the rancher.

"The bandits attacked the ranch two nights back, Snyder. They rescued Gildea and run off young Beans. It's an awful shock for these folks, to lose their boy."

Snyder jumped in his leather and swore hotly.

"What! Yuh mean they took Beans? And Gildea! The dogs!"

"That's right," growled Ellington. "It's killin' the boy's mother."

Dock Snyder was a consummate actor, mused the Ranger. He made a fine show of astonishment, as though he was hearing

for the first time of the raid on the Double L. Hatfield believed that Snyder had been intensely curious as to how the Double L had reacted, and that the sheriff was perhaps hunting for him after the fight in Wattsville.

Snyder would not stay.

"I wanted to bring back yore horse, Ellington," he said, "and see how yuh were. I'm mighty sorry to hear about yore son. It's too bad yuh didn't let me run Gildea to New Mexico like I wanted."

"That was my fault," said Hatfield ruefully. "Yuh had the right idea, Snyder."

Snyder cocked a leg up and rolled a quirly. He licked it deliberately, stuck it in his mouth and lighted up. The possemen behind him were toughened range riders. Hatfield had not seen any of this contingent before, except for Snyder.

"Just where was it yuh arrested Gildea, Ranger?" inquired Snyder. "I figgered we'd mosey down through there. We got a tent and we aim to keep warm nights while we hunt."

Hatfield solemnly described the water gap south of the ranch, from which he had seen Gildea and other robbers emerge.

"But I don't reckon it will do yuh any good to watch down there, Snyder," he said. "Ellington took a run over and they had pulled out. I s'pose Gildea warned 'em not to use that hideout any more, since I snaffled him near it."

"Thanks. I'll try, anyhow."

The Ranger could play a part just as Dock Snyder could. Dock believed he had fooled the big man, for the sheriff was a master at hiding his real feelings, but the Ranger hoped to go him one better. He had saved Snyder's life and had trusted the fellow because of the official papers and the fact that the ranchers had checked up by wiring Snyder's home office.

But he was certain now that Snyder had betrayed him and the people of the strip. As yet he was not certain just how Snyder had accomplished it all, but he meant to uncover the secret.

Snyder was astride a big bay gelding with a wild red eye and a nervous temperament. The bay kept dancing in the yard which was muddy and cut up.

"We'll go to work right away, Ellington," promised Snyder. "I'm sorry yuh're crippled up, Ranger. Be glad to have yuh ride along with me."

"I'm a wreck," groaned Hatfield.

"I'll hunt yore boy, Ellington," went on Snyder gravely. "I'll report back in a few days. *Adios* for now."

"Adios, Sheriff." The Ranger nodded.

Ellington and Byler waved and Snyder turned the bay and rode off, his men jogging after him. Dock swung to raise a gauntleted hand as they topped the rise and hit the south trail from the Double L.

"Now what?" demanded Ellington, turning on Hatfield.

The Ranger was busy studying the tracks left by the bay gelding in the mud.

"See the nail pattern in the right hind shoe?" he asked. "It's mighty clear in this spot where that bay stood for a moment. I won't forget that mark."

"Yuh aim to trail Snyder?"

"That's it. But I'll have to do it careful. He's a mighty shrewd operator."

"Take me along," begged Jeff Byler.

Hatfield thought it over. "All right, Jeff. That is, if yuh'll do just as I tell yuh."

"I promise, Ranger."

The Ranger did not move out for two hours. In the meantime he checked his gear and guns and had Byler do the same. At last they rode from the Double L and Ellington's prayers for his little son went with them. Hatfield had refused to take anyone except Byler on the ticklish, dangerous mission on which both carried an extra blanket and cold weather equipment. Hatfield rode Goldy, and Byler was on his own strong gray, Monty.

NO MORE expert tracker existed than Hatfield. He could read sign with Apache cunning, for such skill and training was a keystone of Ranger work. Leaving behind the area trampled by stock about the ranch he and Jeff Byler could easily follow Snyder's trail in the sheening snow. Meltings and freezings had hardened and packed the snow, but shod hoofs cut through.

The country immediately south was fairly open and Hatfield watched far ahead with keen eyes. Many miles below loomed the wild mountains, with the rolling country broken by the river valley and patches of rock and woods between.

"Yuh saved Snyder from freezin' to death in the blizzard," growled Jeff Byler. "I don't see how he could play yuh so cruel, Hatfield."

"Then yuh don't understand his type of Indian, Jeff. Gratitude wouldn't enter his mind. He's a killer and a tricky one. The way he's fooled the folks in the strip proves it. He figgers he's mighty clever to make a jackass out of a Texas Ranger and he'd laugh when he kills me. That is, if he gets a chance."

Some miles south of the Double L, after crossing the river, Snyder and his men had turned east and traveled behind the screen of brush in the valley.

"Movin' fast," commented Hatfield, for the length of the horses' strides and the indentations left by the hoofs told that.

Snyder had made south for a time as though headed for the water gap in order to deceive the Double L, but now he was on his way.

Mile after mile rolled off. The tracks slanted off to the southeast toward the rugged escarpment of the Staked Plain. The mountains had petered out but a spur of the great plateau thrust north for several miles. Heavy brush screened the lower reaches.

"This is real outlaw country," remarked Hatfield. "It's full of hidin' places. Caves and cuts and plenty of cover."

The sun had reached the top of its arc in the southern heavens. It began to decline and after another hour the Ranger pulled up behind some rocks.

"We better have a cold bite, Jeff," he said. "And the hosses need a rest."

They chewed cold strips of beef and hard bread, then the Ranger took his field-glasses and climbed to the top of the rock pile. He watched the land for some time, sweeping back and forth with long, slow runs.

Before him lay a wide-open stretch which he hated to cross in the daylight, but he could not see any way around without retreating for miles.

"What say?" asked Byler eagerly as the Ranger slid down to his side.

"We'll stick here a while. I'm goin' to rest. You take the glasses and watch from above. Call me if yuh see anybody."

Byler crawled to the top of the rocks, and Hatfield stretched out for a short nap. He still felt the effects of his terrible fight and the ride from Wattsville.

CHAPTER XV

The Rendezvous

LATER in the afternoon Hatfield spelled Byler. About four o'clock he sighted a party of horsemen headed south into the fastnesses of the spur. Dock Snyder and his posse had disappeared that way.

Soon he saw several more riders going through the rocks and brush. At such distance he could not distinguish features but one rider wore a black hood, good protection against the wind.

"Business is pickin' up," he mused, as a third bunch went in.

"S-s-t!"

That was Byler signaling and he snaked down to meet the cowboy.

"Ten riders from the west," reported Byler. "They're well south of us."

It had all the earmarks of a big rendez-

[*Turn page*]

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vous. Hatfield itched to move on the spot.

A big red rock spire reached to the sky at the point where the outlaws passed from his sight. Some thirty horsemen rounded the spire.

"That don't count Dock Snyder and others already in," he thought.

In his saddle-bag he had the black hood taken from the killer he had shot at Wattsville. He conferred with Byler as the sun reddened over the distant western mountains. They ate another cold snack as they squatted close together for the talk.

"Soon as it's dark I'm goin' in there, Jeff," Hatfield said grimly. "I want you to watch the hosses and wait for me, savvy?"

Byler nodded. He would follow orders as he had promised.

"How far would yuh say we are from the ranch?" asked Hatfield.

"I savvy that red spire," replied Byler. "It's mebbe twenty-five miles southeast of the Double L, and eighteen to twenty southwest of Wattsville."

"That's what I figgered. It's the bottom point of a big triangle with the tradin' post and ranch at the upper points."

When the sun dropped the warmth left the air and the tang of winter renewed its deadly grip. They buttoned their coats and made ready.

"Here we go," said the Ranger. "Keep yore hoss quiet and watch yore step, Jeff."

There was a sickle of moon shining on the snow lightening the night. The crunch of hoofs sounded loud to them and against the sky Hatfield could plainly see the rock spire for which he was aiming.

"Looks like a fire glow," whispered Byler.

There was a faint reddish area on the east side of the big rock.

"Ssh!" warned Hatfield, hand shooting out to grasp Byler's wrist. "Somebody's comin'."

They froze, peering into the night. The long shadows of the high bluffs thrust over them.

More riders passed not far away and went on around the spire. The listening pair overheard a gruff challenge.

"Halt! Give yore number!"

"They got a guard on that pass," breathed Hatfield.

He and Byler moved in closer to the shadowy bluffs.

"You wait out here, Jeff," Hatfield said in a low voice. "Hold Goldy but let him go if yuh hear me whistlin', savvy?"

"Luck, Hatfield."

The Ranger slipped away, trying to make it quiet in the crunching snow. But the crust was not strong enough everywhere to hold his weight and he kept breaking through. The night wind had come up. It was from the northwest and he feared that the sounds he made might be heard by the outlaw sentries.

At last he reached the towering rock spire and peeked around the turn. The gap was black, but above the glow of the fire was brighter. He could tell that it was approximately three hundred yards from the entrance. On the other side from the spire was a welter of big boulders laced with bare brush and scrub trees.

The loud sounds of hoofs breaking the crust of snow sent him pressing close in the shadows and he waited while horsemen entered and were challenged. He seized the chance to cross to the other side of the pass, what noises he made lost in the shuffle as the new arrivals talked with the guard.

He worked his way carefully through the rocks and kept on southeast until he could hear the sounds of voices above him. He had made the other side of the bandit rendezvous.

The stones were icy and slippery. The frost bit at his fingers and toes and he donned the black hood, hoping it would help keep his face protected. It was slow, trying to climb around through the unknown terrain in the darkness.

At last he reached a point from which he could look down at the huge wood fire burning before a yawning cavern. Horses stood collected below in a corral, and the outlaws had climbed the last steps by way of a winding path through the rocks. In such bitter weather they had little fear of being trailed and there were no lawmen, outside of the Ranger, operating in the strip. Besides, they had a mighty force of heavily armed fighters on hand.

CROUCHED and shivering from cold, the Ranger envied the gunnies the warmth of the great fire. Its heat was thrown back from the walls, and sides of beef, no doubt stolen from the adjoining range, sizzled merrily on upright spits

made from sharpened branches.

"Must be fifty or sixty in there," he thought.

The noise was increasing. Bottles passed freely and the bearded, tough bandits drank the whisky like water. The cave would be warm, and offer a splendid hide-out.

Hatfield moved a little nearer. The cold penetrated to his bones.

He recognized a number of the killers then. There was Ramon Gildea, the Mexican who had been rescued by Dock Snyder. Snyder's possemen were in the gathering, and the Ranger noted several faces he had seen at Wattsville in the saloon. A fat ruffian with a black spade beard and twinkling little eyes jumped up and began to dance. Laughter greeted the performance.

A small, stocky figure appeared in the red glow, coming from the cavern. Hatfield watched as Beans Ellington emerged and approached Dock Snyder.

Hatfield edged in, bit by bit. He hugged close to the great boulders which spewed from above to the ledge on which the cave opened. He could hear what was being said now, as he hunched in a small black hole among the rocks.

"Say, Dock, why can't I go home?" asked Beans.

"Why yuh want to go home, boy?" replied Snyder. "Ain't yuh havin' fun? Join the party. Here, have a steak." The bandit reached out and handed Beans broiled meat. "Set down. Watch the sport."

Beans obeyed. He began to chew on his meal, keeping close to Snyder. A couple of young outlaws began to sing a raucous duet and Beans, amused in spite of his plight, grinned at the absurd sports. He was young and impressionable and through necessity the lad would eventually accommodate himself to his environment and evil companions. The loving home and the lessons learned from his parents would fade in time.

"Cuss 'em!" mused the Ranger. "Got to save the kid. They may ship him off somewheres in a day or two."

Such bandits often moved from spot to spot and they might take Beans along, far from home.

More were coming to the rendezvous. Hatfield, shivering in the rock crevice, saw the stout figure of Mayor Gus Watts, enormous in a bearskin coat, come puffing up the steep path to the fire.

"Howdy, Boss!" cried Dock Snyder, jumping up to shake hands with Watts. "Come on, set down and have a slug. I got a lot to talk over with yuh."

"Wait till I warm myself," said Watts. "It's a mighty cold night, boys."

Ramon Gildea and the others greeted the storekeeper. Watts stood close to the fire and held out his hands to get the bite from his fingers. His face was as red as a cherry and he was smiling and nodding to his comrades. Dock Snyder stood beside him.

"Yuh got my message about that cussed Ranger, didn't yuh, Gus?" Snyder asked. "I stopped at the Double L this mornin' and he was crippled up. Said he'd been gunned in Wattsville."

Watts was grinning widely. He laughed as he told his followers how he had tricked the Texas Ranger.

Now the Ranger was learning exactly who his enemies in the disputed strip were. And now he knew that Gus Watts was a leader among the outlaws. The storekeeper had dropped his smooth manners. His voice was harsh and commanding and he had a bold look.

"The fat cuss!" thought Hatfield. "He's fooled the folks in these parts and fooled me too, for a while!"

"I got yore warnin' message, Dock, and just in the nick," said Watts. "I worked fast and was all ready for that Ranger scum. He come in with Mark Pettus and the Circle P, not long after Blackie fetched yore note to me. Pore Blackie! I had him try for Pettus but that Ranger cuss broke loose from the few boys I had on hand and ruined Blackie's aim. The Ranger killed Blackie that night, but we chased Hatfield out of the tradin' post and Pettus helped. I made Pettus believe that the big cuss was an outlaw posin' as his Ranger victim! Yuh'd have died laughin' if yuh'd been there."

SNYDER was tickled, and guffawed as Watts recounted how old Pettus had turned against the tall man.

"Yuh wounded him mighty bad, Gus," said Snyder. "He's lyin' up at the Double L and he's got such a bad leg he can't fork a bronc."

Watts had a long drink from a bottle and accepted a mug of hot coffee and a sandwich. After eating, the stout boss wiped his hands on the bearskin coat and then stood up, raising a pudgy hand for silence.

"I'll get this over with, boys, before yuh're all so drunk yuh can't hear what I say," he began drily.

Everybody laughed, tickled at the compliment. Beans Ellington watched with wide eyes as the outlaws listened to Gus Watts who spoke in a loud, clear voice.

"I'm glad to see yuh all gathered here tonight. There's several bands in these parts and I been friends with all. But what we must do now is stick together till we have the strip. In order to do this we got to get rid of several key men who are agin us. I mean Mark Pettus, for one, and Newt Ellington for another."

Beans leaped to his feet. "Yuh better not try and hurt my dad!" he shouted angrily.

Ramon Gildea seized the boy by the waist and threw him against the rock wall.

"Leetle fool! Keep quiet!"

The shock sobered Beans. He crouched there, at bay, his face screwed up as he tried to hold back the tears. Watts glared at him.

"Mebbe we can use that brat to catch his old man," he said thoughtfully. "We must stop any plans to form a Texas county here. That would mean local law officers and posses after us all the time, boys. Yuh'll lose yore prime hideouts like this one. We want to keep Wattsville as the center, for there's big profits in sellin' goods to the settlers. And in the spring we'll sell off the Double L and other spreads to folks who come to the strip. Snyder can keep collectin' taxes like he's been doin'. I aim to attach to New Mexico finally for it's not so organized as Texas and there ain't any cussed Rangers to horn in on us."

"How about that fool Hatfield?" inquired Dock Snyder. "He thinks I'm a pard of his because he picked me up in the storm."

"We'll work out a scheme to trap him through you in case we miss him at the Double L," said Watts. "I've wrecked his game for the time bein'. Pettus is gunnin' for him and the old rascal's givin' the alarm through the strip that Hatfield is an outlaw who shot a Ranger and took his name and star!"

CHAPTER XVI

With Red-Eye's Aid

FROZEN in his hideout in the rocks, Hatfield overheard the enemy plans. Watts had everything figured out. The bandits would snatch the big Circle P, the Double L and other ranches whose owners dared try to organize against them.

They would sell land to pioneers eagerly seeking homes. Watts would realize a fortune by supplying these victims and Snyder would gouge them with tax collections. The outlaws would crush any possible opposition that might arise. Watts had worked out every angle and he gave careful instructions to his men.

"We'll set Saturday night—that's four days from tomorrer—as the time we start the big push," Hatfield heard him say. "Things are ticklish right now and we stand to lose a fortune if the cowmen in the strip get together before we hit. That's why the Ranger's comin' worried me so. We start at the Double L."

"Them adobe walls are mighty thick at Ellington's," observed Dock Snyder. "We might lose a bunch of men breachin' 'em."

"I savvy." Watts nodded. "Some of yuh had a tough time at Ellington's. That's why I sent out for blastin' powder. It come yesterday mornin' and I got it cached in the supply shed. I'll pass it out when yuh're ready to attack, and yuh can blow them walls wide open."

After Watts had finished his talk liquor was passed again and again. The killers drank, and gorged on beef, bread, coffee and molasses. The cave was filled with supplies and the party grew noisier and noisier as the burning whisky took effect.

Hatfield steeled himself against the suffering he was enduring from the cold.

"I got to fetch Beans out of there, no matter what," he told himself. "Wonder if it'll stampede 'em when they miss him, or will they just figger he run off in the darkness and waste their time huntin' him?" But he knew that no matter how they reacted to Beans' escape he must

try to save the boy.

As he gritted his teeth to keep them from chattering he saw that one by one the outlaws were reeling off to sleep in drunken stupor. Some wrapped themselves in blankets, while others staggered to the cave. Beans Ellington had long since crept back to his blankets inside the cave. Some of the bandits donned their hoods to keep their heads and faces warm as they slept.

The trail sentries had come in and had been spelled by others. Watts lay on his wide back with his feet to the fire, his fur coat keeping off the chill. He had drunk rotgut liquor until his eyes had glazed. Dock Snyder, Ramon Gildea and the rest were soon snoring.

The fire died down and became a great pile of glowing embers which sent waves of heat against the reflecting rock wall. The light was not so bright now, so Hatfield began to move. He had on the black hood and his Colts rode in the holsters of the belt strapped outside his jacket. Slumped down, with the mask over his head, he hoped to pass as one of the outlaws.

Bit by bit he edged toward the cavern mouth. Men lay around but only a few were still awake and they hardly glanced at the hooded figure. Several gangs had come to the rendezvous.

"Some party, huh, Tiny?" a drunken man said thickly.

"A beaut," growled Hatfield, staggering on.

Hatfield's legs were as stiff as boards and he did not have to play at unsteady locomotion. When he reached the rim of ashes about the wood fire he squatted there to warm himself.

Had it not been for the young prisoner among this evil crew the Ranger would long since have retreated the way he had come. But he was determined to make a stab at saving Beans, even if it meant a change in Watts' plans, which Hatfield had learned at such cost. He was ready for a fight, ready to whip his Colts and shoot it out in case he was discovered.

But the alcohol was his ally. It had dulled the bandits' senses. He was aware how such men enjoyed drowning themselves in liquor so they could relax for a time from the unending strain of their dangerous existence. After a robbery and shooting the outlaw mode was to drink and carouse until dead to the world. Yet there were still enough of them not sodden who would jump to arms if an alarm came.

HE FOUND a bottle and took a swig. The fiery stuff burned his gullet but it was gratifying and he mixed more in a tin cup and filled it from the coffee bucket.

Somewhat thawed out, the hooded Ranger eased to the cave mouth. It was black in there. Booted legs, covered by furs and blankets, stuck out every which way.

"Beans!" whispered Hatfield.

The only reply was snoring and muttering. Several invisible men shifted. Hatfield crawled through the sprawled owlhoots, feeling his way in the gloom.

"Beans!" he called again, and his voice echoed in the great cavern where bales and boxes were stored along the rock walls.

"Lie down and shut up, yuh drunken jack," growled somebody from the darkness.

"Beans!" said Hatfield again.

Someone on his left shifted and swore.

"Will yuh dry up?" snarled the outlaw. "My head's split wide open."

"Who's goin' to make me?" said the Ranger gruffly.

Profanity streamed from the other man's lips. Perhaps the noise awakened Beans Ellington for suddenly the boy was at Hatfield's side.

"Yuh call me, mister? I'm Beans."

Hatfield gripped the small wrist. "Quiet, Beans!" he whispered. "It's Jim. I'm goin' to take yuh home."

The Ranger pulled a blanket from off a drunken man and wrapped Beans in it.

"I'll carry yuh a ways to fool 'em, Beans," he breathed.

He straightened up as he left the cave mouth and moved through the dimming firelight with the blanket-draped form in his strong arms. A few men stirred, but no one challenged the hooded Ranger.

Hatfield dared not go down the path. There were guards out there and he might never pass the first. The cold night would sober them up quickly and they would be alert.

He left the lighted area and turned into the rocks. Beans could stand on his own

feet and the Ranger guided the shivering lad through narrow aisles and over dangerous slides. But it was an hour before Hatfield hailed Jeff Byler, who was waiting, feeling frozen stiff, outside the towering rock spire which marked the bandit hideout.

"Jeff!" he whispered hoarsely. "I got Beans!"

Byler suppressed his cry of joy. He seized the boy in his arms and held him tightly.

"Look out, Jeff," complained Beans. "Yuh're squeezin' me to death."

"Not so loud, Beans," warned the Ranger. "Come on! We got to make tracks!"

Their weight broke the snow crust and there was no noise from the outlaws now to cover such sounds and the voice of Beans might have been heard in his joy at seeing Byler. Hatfield whirled as Byler lifted Beans to the black's saddle.

He could hear someone coming rapidly around the bulge of the spire's base. The outside sentry had caught the sounds they had been forced to make and those guards would have shotguns or carbines.

Hatfield's Colt jumped to his hand. His fingers were stiff with cold as he threw up his weapon. A burly dark figure hurried past the spire. The horses and Byler, with the boy on Monty, stood clearly against the lighter sky and the sweep of the snow.

"Halt! Who's that?" The outlaw challenge was loud and peremptory and the Ranger saw the glint on the double barrels of a shotgun.

Spreading buck would hit Byler and Beans, cripple the two horses. Hatfield had to shoot—and fast. The trail guard caught it in the body and his shotgun belched flame and lead but the charge hit the snowy ground in front of Byler, the sentry's aim wrecked as he felt the shattering force of the Ranger bullet.

INSTANTLY shouts and answering calls came from other sentinels. There were enough partially sobered gunnies in the hideout to wipe out Byler and Hatfield once they charged.

"Pronto, Jeff!" snapped the Ranger. "Mount and take Beans home. I'll lead 'em off and try to give yuh a chance. Tell Ellington they aim to attack the Double L and other ranches on Saturday! They got blastin' powder and Gus Watts is behind it all."

"Yuh better come with us—" began Byler.

The Ranger cut him off. "Hustle. Yuh can't make any real time carryin' double."

He slapped Monty's flank and started the gray running off west along the beaten track in the snow left by the outlaws who had come from that direction.

The golden sorrel stood close to his rider as Byler began picking up speed. Hatfield could hear the hurrying tread of outlaws making for the spot from which the shots had come. The guard he had shot had rolled back behind the bulge of the spire and was screeching shrilly.

Swiftly Hatfield mounted and rode at right angles to the course Byler had taken. He turned the sorrel and began to blast at the narrow black entrance to the hideout. At the same time he set up a fiendish shrill yelling to attract the guards.

His gun flamed at them as he kept moving slowly away. More and more outlaws were jumping from their blankets and hurrying to join those already coming at the Ranger.

Bullets shrieked close to him but he made an elusive target as the sorrel trotted in zigzags. The bandits howled and shot in fury, and ran past the spire where they were outlined against the snow.

"There they go!" shouted one, pointing at the Ranger.

Hatfield pulled off from the spire, raising a terrific ruckus to attract them. Byler had disappeared on the trail back home but it would be a long, cold ride and the cowboy would be lucky if he made it by dawn, with Monty carrying double.

Batches of owlhoots pushed forth, and others quickly followed, bringing out saddled mustangs to pursue the Ranger. There would be plenty of gunnies able to ride, for by now they were shocked to some sobriety by the alarm in the night.

CHAPTER XVII

Wanted for Killing

RACING away from the rendezvous, Hatfield slanted northeast. Half a

dozen eager killers were coming for him despite his blazing guns and challenging cries.

The land near the spire was broken by hummocks, patches of woods and stony ground, and he did not want them to lose him too soon, so he led them on, the small van riding hard on excellent horses and the main bunch of a couple of dozen desperate men flogging along a hundred yards or so behind the leaders. Stragglers brought up the rear as they strove to overtake the man who had invaded their stronghold in the night. They could make him out against the sky and the white blanket of the snow.

As the range opened out the speed increased and Hatfield let Goldy pick a way. He could only pray that the sorrel would not break through into some treacherous pothole for, once dismounted, the Ranger would be as good as dead.

For an hour they ran him, for when they fell behind he would slow down and permit them to raise their hopes.

It was a terrible ride in the cold night, for the wind was biting and penetrated through the thickest of garments. The bandits did not like it any more than Hatfield did and one by one they turned back toward the rendezvous.

He was miles northeast of the spire when the last bunch quit his trail, hurrying back to the fire and the liquor at the hideout. But the Ranger, feeling frozen stiff, was still out in the cold. The golden sorrel was warm from the run, but even so Goldy hated the knifing gale.

"We got to have shelter, Goldy," said the Ranger through chattering teeth.

The Double L was too far away to try and reach now. And he must rest the golden gelding and himself, for both were worn to a frazzle.

"Wattsville ain't many miles off," he muttered.

It was a bold move but he was desperate. He hoped to find the trading post almost deserted, with Gus Watts and his killers out. He could make it before dawn and there were cabins and other buildings besides the saloon in town.

"Pettus has wrecked me with everybody but Ellington, I reckon," he decided. "Mebbe I can smell out that explosive powder." The threat of the explosives was a terrible one.

He made for Wattsville, orienting himself by the stars. He had his face covered from the bite of the wind and hunched over the sorrel as Goldy sturdily carried him through the snow.

Several times he thought he could not make it, but doggedly pushed on. His legs and arms were like stiffened boards when he sighted the buildings of the trading post across the stream. They stood bleak against the first light streak in the eastern sky. The wind howled in his ears as he crossed the shallow ford, with the ice breaking under Goldy's hoofs.

WATTSVILLE was dark and the few who dwelt in the mayor's bailiwick, such as Pedro and his family, were asleep. The Ranger made for the shack in which he had found the dying "Blackie," the outlaw who had brought Dock Snyder's warning to Watts.

The door was not locked and he did not believe anyone had heard or seen him in the street. He checked on the interior, found the shack deserted, and led Goldy inside. There was a wooden bar for the single door which he dropped into place, then struck a match and cupped it in his stiff fingers.

It was a relief just to be out of the wind but the cabin was as cold as an icehouse. He draped a dirty blanket from a bunk over the single window and crouched at the pot-bellied stove by the rear wall. A rusted pipe went through the back wall of the cabin. Chunks of wood and dry kindling and a pile of newspapers lay in the corner.

Soon the Rangers had a blazing fire going. He could only hope that the glow would not show in the chimney pipe. When the fire burned down some he would be safer.

He moved about and helped thaw out by rubbing the sorrel over. Then he blanketed his horse.

As the heat of the fire warmed the little room he began to feel more relaxed. Sleep tugged at him. He stoked the fire again and, wrapping himself in a blanket, he lay down on one of the bunks.

When he awoke the fire had died out but the shack was warm enough for the sun beat down on the roof and the heat from the embers still held. Goldy stood at the far end of the shack, head down.

HATFIELD got up. Around the edge of the blanket at the window the bright slivers of sunlight pierced through. He felt refreshed and hunted around for something to eat, finding some stale biscuits. In his saddle-bags he had iron rations and he made the best of what there was at hand.

He peeked out the front window, raising the blanket a bit. After a while he saw Pedro, Watts's Mexican helper, leave the saloon and go to a stable at the rear.

"Wonder which is the supply shack?" mused the Ranger.

He also wondered what time it was, but could not see the sun. That meant it had passed over the center the cabin, so it must be after noon.

As he was peering out he caught the thud of hoofs, then saw Gus Watts, followed by two other riders, come from the ford toward the saloon. Pedro emerged to greet his employer. The Mexican led off the steaming brown gelding which Watts had been riding and the two mustangs of the outlaws with the fat man. The trio entered the bar and slammed the door shut.

"Mebbe I could arrest that fat cuss and cut him off from his pards," mused the Ranger. "I don't like that blastin' powder idea of his."

It might spike the bandits' chances to lose Watts, he thought, and if he could get his hands on the explosives it would be a big help. But he needed some time in which to organize, and he must reach Newt Ellington since Ellington was the one rancher in the big strip who'd listen to him.

Steam from melted frost obscured the saloon window, but the connecting store seemed empty. The door was closed and nobody was outside at the moment. Watts and his two companions were no doubt busy with drinks inside the bar, and calling for hot food after the cold ride.

Hatfield left Goldy hidden in the cabin and, seizing his chance, snaked across the narrow road, making for the store. Reaching it, he was out of sight of anybody in the saloon and waited to see if any alarm had come.

But he evidently had not been seen. As he went up on the low porch of the store a white poster tacked to the wall caught his eye.

WANTED FOR MURDER! JIM HAYNES, ALIAS J. HATFIELD

TALL & BROAD SHOULDERS. BLACK HAIR. THIS MAN IS DESPERATE. KILLED A TEXAS RANGER AND POSES AS HIS VICTIM. HAS STAR & PAPERS. WILL KILL IF CORNERED. REWARD. NOTIFY CAPTAIN, HQ, TEX. RANGERS, AUSTIN.

"That's the way he pulled it!" thought Hatfield. He recalled now that Mark Pettus had been reading the same sort of poster the night that Hatfield had been run out of Wattsville.

Grudgingly he had to admit it was a smart move on the fat storekeeper's part. It fitted in, and it scotched the Ranger's chances.

He tried the store door. It was unlocked and he went in. Around him were boxes and goods and his eye caught Watts' advertising signs. The printing was of the same variety as that on the circular.

A heavy step and the click of a latch sent him behind the counter where he crouched, ready for a fight. "I'll be back in a jiffy, boys," he heard Watts say. "I got to change these wet clothes."

The big mayor came through the covered passage into the store and turned toward his living quarters, reached through a door to the rear. Hatfield snaked down behind the counter and crouched there, listening. He could hear Watts moving around, then the sound of another door being opened. After that he did not hear Watts.

He lifted the latch carefully, gun in his other hand. The room beyond was empty. It held a comfortable bedstead, and a big stove in the center was glowing with heat. Tables and chairs and a rug on the floor, with oil lamps and other belongings made it a cozy spot. There was a closet on the side and beside it was a desk, on which Hatfield saw a small printing set of block letters and an ink pad.

Somebody was coming. Hatfield stepped into the closet and pushed the door part way to. He could see through the crack in one direction and through the opening in the other.

GUS WATTS came back into his quarters. He was lugging a small but heavy keg and gaily whistling "Buffalo Gals." He moved carefully and pushed

the back door shut with his foot when he was inside.

Hatfield watched the fat man gently lower the keg to the floor in the corner. It had a red top and he could read the large red letters painted on it:

DANGER! EXPLOSIVES!

"That's what I want," thought the Ranger.

Watts removed his coat and inner jacket. He stripped the wool shirt from his torso. Rolls of fat creased his protruding paunch. At that instant Hatfield with his star pinned on, stepped forth with a Colt trained on the half-naked man.

"Quiet, Watts, or I'll blow yuh wide open!"

Watts nearly jumped out of his hide. His mouth dropped open and he sniffed with frantic alarm.

"Who, what?" he sputtered. Shock took his breath.

"Cards are on the table," said the Ranger coldly. "Yuh're under arrest. I'm takin' yuh with me."

All the fight went out of the stout man. Anyhow he had laid his guns on the bed. And he knew the Hatfield's swiftness and accuracy.

"How did yuh get in here?" he demanded, finding breath at last.

"We'll talk it all over cozy when yuh're locked up," replied the Ranger.

"Why can't we palaver now?" gasped Watts, clutching at straws. "I'll pay yuh anything yuh say if yuh let me go free!"

"I don't work for the money in it," Hatfield said sternly. "Yuh can't bribe yore neck out of a noose, Watts. I aim to smash yore outlaw empire and hold this strip for Texas."

The wood stove threw waves of heat into the air. Watts faced the Ranger. The mayor stood near a side door, a door which must give into the covered entry behind the store. Watts was dizzy from shock now, and had to steady himself with a hand on the desk.

Behind Hatfield doors banged and a hasty tread came in the store, approaching Watt's quarters.

"Oh, Senor Watts!" a voice sang out. "Senor Watts!"

Hatfield quickly stepped back behind the closet door, which was ajar. He was partially hidden and he scowled at Watts and signaled the man to keep quiet. The door from the store opened and Ramon Gildea came into the room.

The scar-faced Mexican did not see the big Ranger off to the side behind the door.

"Snyder sends me for the powdaire for he has gone to surround Ellington's," he said.

The tense attitude and sweated face of the mayor told Gildea all was not well. He turned then and saw Hatfield with the raised Colt.

"Join the party, Gildea," drawled the Ranger. "Get over by the wall and keep yore paws up."

Gildea began to tremble violently and his white teeth bared in a snarl of hate.

"The Rangaire! You are here!"

"Jump!" snapped Hatfield, as Gildea stood stunned.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Last Gasp

GILDEA had two Colts in his holsters and no doubt carried a knife in a leg sheath as did most Mexican gunmen. But, pinned by the menacing eye of the Ranger pistol, Gildea raised his brown hands and backed toward Watts.

"Keep to the left," warned Hatfield.

But Gildea had stepped between the Ranger and Gus Watts. The instant he was shielded by the Mexican, Watts gave a sharp cry and flung himself back with surprising agility. He had the side door open in nothing flat.

Gildea ducked, panicked by the sudden scrambling and by Hatfield darting toward him to intercept Watts. The Mexican yelled and made a lightning draw. The outlaw gun rose in a breath and Hatfield was forced to deal first with Gildea, since Watts was unarmed.

It was a close thing for Hatfield. Gildea was fast and desperate. The Mexican's Colt roared and the bullet shrieked between Hatfield's spread legs. But the Ranger had already fired and the steady pistol pushed against the palm of his hand.

Gildea was whirled completely around by the heavy slug. He fell on his side but rolled over and a brown hand clawed at

his pants leg.

Watts was diving through that door. Hatfield's shot missed the disappearing legs. It was astonishing with what speed he moved, and under other circumstances would have been ludicrous. In the next breath, though, the Ranger's eye caught the glint on the long knife blade which Gildea had pulled from a sheath under his trouser leg. Gildea, eyes blazing, attempted to make a deadly throw but the Ranger's first bullet had wrecked him.

Hatfield fired a second at the Mexican which pierced the upraised wrist. The knife fell to the floor. Gildea shuddered, then lay still. Watts slammed the heavy door and the Ranger heard a bolt rasp shut.

Hatfield sprang over to the door, but it was a solid one and Watts had it locked from the other side. He kicked at the lower panel but only hurt his toes. He tried for Watts by shooting through the wood but the fat man was too shrewd to stand in line.

"This way, boys!" Watts was shouting at the top of his voice. "Help! The Ranger's in my quarters. This way! Cut him down!"

A shotgun roared on the other side of the door as Watts sought to get his enemy. He had found a weapon in the entry room back of his store.

Buckshot rattled about the Ranger, who sprang over and tucked the keg under his left arm. Replies of alarmed gunnies came to Watts' call. Pedro and the others in the saloon had set up howls and came hurrying to see what was wrong.

The Ranger stepped over the dead Gildea and took the shortest route back to Goldy, through the store. Watts was still in the rear of the building, yelling his head off.

The connecting door to the saloon flew open and Hatfield blasted Watts's men with his gun as they appeared. A wild shot missed him and cracked the glass of the counter. Then he had reached the front exit and flung himself outside.

Riders were coming from the ford toward the trading post—Gildea's men. Six of them were in the bunch. Gildea had ridden ahead of his gang, after the blasting powder.

Hatfield dashed across the road. He had almost reached Blackie's shack when the gunnies sighted and recognized him. They swerved his way, yelling and drawing their pistols.

Bullets came at him as he hastily brought out Goldy and ducked around behind the cabin. The building gave him protection as he mounted and started away, holding for dear life to the keg. From what he had heard, Dock Snyder had the Double L under siege and had dispatched Gildea to pick up the explosive so that the thick adobe walls of Ellington's home could be breached.

They must have attacked earlier than they had planned. He was sure they had done so because of Beans Ellington's escape. The lad had overheard a great deal at the bandit hideout and they had had to strike fast to prevent the alarm from running through the strip.

He glanced back over his hunched shoulder, guiding Goldy with knee pressure for one hand was occupied with the cask and the other held a revolver. The mounted outlaws had cut between the line of shacks across from the saloon and were spurring after him, shooting as they came. But the pace was fast and the jolting mustangs under the bandits wrecked steady aim. He could hear the whistling lead in the air.

GUS WATTS and the men who had been in the saloon were out in the street. The fat mayor was still naked to the waist and held a double-barreled shotgun which he brandished at the Ranger.

The river blocked the way west and Hatfield streaked up the bank as the sorrel picked up his pace. Ice fringed the edges of the stream but in the center the muddy current looked deep and forbidding. He could not chance bogging down in there, and he was cut off from the ford.

The pursuers whooped it up as they flogged after him. But Goldy slowly gained, and the men had come at a fast clip from the rendezvous so their mustangs were fagged and no match for the sorrel even in a short dash.

The keg was clumsy and hard to carry on such a ride. It annoyed the sorrel for it kept jouncing and bruising even through the pads. Hatfield tried holding it up but the muscles of his arm soon tired and the cold made them knot with

paralyzing pain.

The river made a bend northwest and he tore along the bank. Bare brush fringed the edge of the stream. The snow crunched under the flying hoofs, kicking in spurts from under them. The sun was warm and by it Hatfield thought it was around two o'clock.

After half an hour had gone by he was so far ahead that the outlaws gave up the chase and turned back toward Wattsville. The Ranger slowed a bit so that Goldy could regain his wind for it had been a hard run. The snow increased the labor for the horse.

It was another mile before the Ranger found a crossing which looked as though it might do. He let Goldy have his head and the gelding made it, climbing the opposite bank and shaking off the cold water.

"We got to make time and save Ellington and Byler, Goldy," Hatfield murmured.

At the Double L were all his trusted friends in the strip. Watts had wrecked his standing with Mark Pettus and others, and if the outlaws destroyed Ellington and Byler, it would mean long delay in coping with the gang.

Hatfield would have no place where he could base his attack against Watts. He would be forced to make a dash over the long, cruel miles to the nearest telegraph office, a hundred miles from Wattsville, and ask for assistance either from Austin or from some organized community which had enough strength to give it.

Meanwhile Watts and his men would have a clear field and could kill their enemies in the strip. They could clinch their deadly hold on the range.

"It's a tossup whether we'd ever make it," the Ranger muttered.

Far in the north the sky had an ominous look. The sun was bland enough and gleamed on the great sweep of the snowy land, but up there blackness was slowly creeping across the heavens. It might mean another paralyzing storm making up.

The keg held him back. Even if he tied it on to his saddle it would bounce up and down and might seriously lame Goldy. To the attackers the explosives would be an immense help, but the Ranger could not foresee that it would prove of much use to him. He rode up the river until he came to a pool where he heaved the cask into the water. It came sluggishly to the surface and slowly moved downstream with the current. Hatfield drew a Colt and from a distance put several holes in it. The keg filled and went down, bubbles coming up.

"Glad to be rid of that," he thought as he turned Goldy toward the Double L.

The leaden night had come when he topped a rise not far from Ellington's. He had buttoned his coat and put on the black hood in his efforts to keep from freezing. The wind was picking up its speed and cut like a knife.

In the sky ahead he could see a red glow, and feared it might mark the burning of the Double L.

He soon discovered that attackers were all around the ranch, but the glow came from their fires, lighted to keep them warm as they held the siege. Dock Snyder was waiting for the blasting powder so that crude bombs could be hurled at the thick adobe ramparts of the house in which Ellington and his men had taken refuge.

The outlaws had tried storming the place before and did not like the hot fire of the cowboys and the difficulty of getting through. With explosives it would be simple.

FOR the time being Hatfield left the hood on. It might fool some of the attackers, but Dock Snyder would recognize Goldy.

"They got worried when Beans escaped," he thought, as he sat the sorrel, trying to decide on his next move.

Snyder had rushed here to hold Ellington in while Gildea went for the powder. Perhaps they had picked up Jeff Byler's trail as the cowboy had ridden for home.

"I hope Byler made it," he muttered.

He could look down the snow-covered slope and see the dismounted outlaws hugging the roaring fires, made from fence rails and brush and lumber picked up around the ranch. Now and then a shot blazed from the darkened house and he knew the Double L men were in there, defending themselves.

Had it not been for Watts' trick in printing the circulars and turning the inhabitants of the strip against him, Hat-

field would have turned and ridden to give the alarm. Pettus was only a couple of hours away, but Hatfield needed Ellington or Byler to put matters straight. The Circle P was gunning for him, sure that the Ranger was a killer posing as a law officer.

Closer in a mounted outrider challenged him but, seeing the black hood, passed the Ranger. The outlaw did not recognize the sorrel.

"Snyder's in there," called the sentry. "Report to him."

A couple of hundred yards south of Hatfield's position three more masked men were riding up. Parties were coming to join the gang around the Double L.

Dock Snyder's tall figure was near a blazing fire on the east side of the ranch. Snyder stood with his back to the fire, warming himself. The men had provisions and liquor, and logs and planks made seats which kept them off the thawing ground about the blaze.

Hatfield edged away from Snyder. Dock wore a hood but Hatfield knew him and no doubt the outlaw leader would recognize the Ranger.

The fires wrecked the Ranger's idea of sneaking through the outlaw lines and somehow bringing out Byler or Ellington with him so that aid could be fetched. It was impossible to hide with such light as the fires gave.

"Hey, you!" a gunny lieutenant hailed him. "Get down and leave yore hoss with the others. We ain't goin' in till the blastin' powder comes. Gildea went for it to Wattsville."

CHAPTER XIX

Siege

EASILY Hatfield dismounted and dropped his reins. He walked slowly past the big fire where a dozen killers waited. He edged toward the ranchhouse. If he ran for it the people inside, his friends, would shoot at him since he wore a hood. If he removed the hood the outlaws would know him and open fire. He doubted if he could make the dash in the red glow.

"Big boy, come have a slug," invited the gunny who had spoken to him before. "Where yuh from—Fred's bunch?"

"No, he ain't one of our boys," said a bearded bruiser.

Dock Snyder left his post and came striding up the line. He was giving instructions to his lieutenants. Snyder was Watts' field general. Hatfield did not care to meet Snyder face to face even though hooded.

"Wait till I put up my hoss," he said gruffly.

He started back to Goldy. Snyder sighted the tall figure and no doubt something familiar caused the outlaw chief to sing out:

"Say, wait a jiffy, you."

Hatfield feigned not to hear. He was close to Goldy and back from the light and the men at the fire stared after him. Snyder suddenly let out a howl and pulled a Colt.

"Stop that man! Stop him!"

Hatfield leaped to his saddle. His Colt whipped out and he fired quickly at Snyder. The range was long for a pistol. Snyder staggered and fell to one knee and the men at the nearest bonfire yanked out their guns.

Hatfield swung half around as he tore off, sending lead to rattle their aim.

He reached the top of the rise just ahead of two mounted guards who had come flogging and whooping over to cut him off. Colts blared and his own answered, but he kept moving at full speed. The bandits reacted like a swarm of angry hornets.

The cold wind cut him as he rode. It was obviously impossible to get through to the men inside the Double L ranchhouse, and he had counted on Ellington and Byler to undo the damage Gus Watts had brought about with the forged circulars.

"I got to have Pettus' help!" he muttered. "But he's shore I'm an outlaw killer."

Shivering from the icy blasts he felt a fatalistic desperation foreign to his determined heart. The forces of mighty Nature conspired against him with the powerful enemies in the disputed strip. On the suffering Ranger, run to a frazzle and numb with frost-bite, depended the fates

of the Ellingtons and all decent people in the section!

It was a temptation to stop and hunt some recess out of the wind where he might build a fire and warm himself. He had to coax the sorrel to breast the wintry gale as he made for the Circle P, Mark Pettus' home. He had never been there, but knew where it lay.

It was close to midnight when he sighted the single yellow rectangle of a lighted window. Cautiously he approached the place. It was a big ranch, with a roomy adobe and timber house, bunkhouse, stables and corrals. Quiet reigned save for the savage howling of the wind.

Hatfield left the golden sorrel blanketed in the lee of a big black barn. He moved his arms and legs as he sought to get the terrible stiffness out of them. His face felt congealed despite the mask, which he removed. It would hardly help with Pettus.

The Circle P riders thought he was a bandit killer. Their guns had sought his life and any of Pettus' waddies would shoot him on sight. He had to be careful.

When he approached the ranchhouse where he could look through the windows, he saw that Mark Pettus sat in an armchair by his round table. A wood fire sent waves of heat from the hearth and Pettus was hunched over in his wool pants and sweater. His thin hair gleamed silver in the lamplight as his lips moved. He was reading a magazine as he sought to court sleep. Decades of memories and the ills common to such an age made him wakeful.

When Hatfield had checked the fact that Pettus was in there alone, he left the window and softly walked to the front door. He lifted the latch and stepped quickly inside. Pettus turned to see who had come in at such a late hour.

THE alert blue eyes in the wrinkled face widened and he opened his mouth. His shriveled hand started toward the holstered Colt on the table near him.

"Hold that, Pettus," ordered the Ranger. "Yuh're goin' to talk to me." He made a draw because Pettus meant to shoot.

Pettus sat quiet under the gun but a sneering scowl twisted his strong face. The rancher was not afraid, but he was no fool.

"So yuh've come to rob me," he growled. "Well, yuh won't get much. There's a couple hundred dollars in that table drawer. I keep the rest in a safer place than here."

"I'm no robber, Pettus, and no outlaw."

Pettus scarcely heard his words.

"Or mebbe yuh figger on ransom?" he said. "Yuh can kill me if yuh please."

He folded his arms and set his stubborn mouth, glaring at Hatfield.

Hatfield stood with back to the fire and the warmth was the finest thing he had ever known.

"Listen to me, Pettus," he said. "Ellington's place is under siege by a passel of outlaws. Gus Watts is their leader and Dock Snyder is field general."

"Snyder's a sheriff," snapped Pettus.

"No, he ain't. I figger he killed the real Dock Snyder and took his name and identity so as to shake down the cowmen in this strip. Watts wants to hold control for hisself. They found I was a Ranger and Watts printed the fake circulars."

Pettus did not believe him. Hatfield could tell that from the unbending look of the old man.

"I won't take any stock in lies a cuss like yuh makes up. How much do yuh reckon yuh kin get out of me, outlaw?"

"Ellington's in real danger. Yuh must bring men to save him and his people."

"No decent hombre would have acted the way yuh did that night. Yuh killed my boy Dinny and pore Healy's got a busted jaw."

"I couldn't give up my guns. Watts would have finished me once I was disarmed. Yuh wouldn't listen then any more than yuh will now. One of Watts' killers shot Dinny through the winder."

The obstinate old rancher had fixed his opinions and could not be turned from them.

"Come on, then, Pettus. Yuh'll see for yoreself. Wrap up warm. We're goin' to Ellington's."

At first Pettus refused to budge, but when the Ranger started to tie him up and take him along anyway, Pettus swore at him and put on his jacket and bearskin coat and hat. He thought that the big man was running him off to hold him for ransom in some mountain cavern, but under the Ranger gun he rode along, his

men asleep in the bunkhouse and the wind howling as Hatfield saddled a horse for the old fellow.

More than two hours later they saw the glowing red fires and the outlaws collected about them, sitting their saddles from a rise northeast of the Double L. Pettus stared at the startling sight. He was hunched up, with only his eyes showing.

"There's Gus Watts down there with Dock Snyder and his crew," said Hatfield, leaning over so he could speak to Pettus against the wind. "Snyder's limpin', but he ain't hurt much."

Mark Pettus turned his big black horse and rode away. . . .

Back at the Circle P it took an hour for Pettus to thaw out. Drink and some food from the kitchen occupied the big Ranger. The sight of the outlaws around the Double L, the black-hooded killers in the red firelight had done the trick.

Pettus had roused his men and told them the truth. Riders had been dispatched to give the alarm to ranches which were close enough to give aid. Pettus had around thirty men, and they needed double that amount.

The gray dawn was at hand when neighbors began arriving. They were armed and ready to follow the Ranger and Pettus. A hot breakfast had been cooked in the big ranch kitchen.

Hatfield went outside. The weather was a problem in the winter. The knifing wind had abated and it felt warmer, but the sky was dark, with no sight of the rising sun. As he looked up at the sky something softly caressed his cheek and he knew it was a snowflake, but hated to admit it.

"Back in the house," Pettus growled, "It's goin' to snow holy blazes, Ranger."

They all knew it, could read the threat of the heavens. Hatfield looked around at the grim faces. They were tough ranchers and their men who had answered Pettus's call.

"We got to try and save Ellington, gents," said the Ranger. "They aim to kill him and hit you if yuh buck 'em. Gus Watts is after control in this strip."

HE GAVE them a quick resume of what had occurred since he had come. Angry exclamations went up as they realized what Watts and Snyder had been up to. Most of them had paid the taxes demanded and they were individualists, accustomed to protecting themselves, but they could band together for a common cause under such a leader as Jim Hatfield.

When he said, "I'm on my way to the Double L," they all followed the tall figure outside.

The snowstorm had quickly struck. The flakes were large and fell thickly. Already the visibility was poor. The snow stuck to the horses and riders as the Ranger led them from the Circle P. He had nearly sixty fighters behind him, and Mark Pettus was at his side.

They could see but a few yards ahead even in the daylight. With snow already covering the frozen ground, the new blizzard made swift gains and the horses plunged through increasing drifts.

"We can't make it, Ranger!" shouted Pettus, over the storm.

The snow was a clinging horror for the mustangs and more and more riders fell behind. All were soaking from the melting flakes. It was a cloudburst of snow.

Again the wind was picking up from the north. It slashed at the men and animals. A rancher named Naylor reached out and seized Hatfield by the shoulder.

"We can't stay out in this!" he shouted. "We'll lose our way and freeze, Ranger. Better backtrack to the Circle P while yuh got the chance."

Hatfield shook his head. He thought he could tell direction by the wind but he knew that if it veered his last pointer would be gone!

CHAPTER XX

Under the Gun

PETTUS and Naylor had been right. Hatfield knew that now. They could not reach the Double L. He silently turned the golden sorrel and they struggled back to the old fellow's ranch. It was snowing so hard that the tracks they had made coming out were nearly obliterated. Looking like snowmen, they put up the horses and retired to the warmth and shelter of

the buildings. The fate of the Double L was blotted out in the furious blizzard.

The storm raged all day and through the night. It was still snowing early the next morning when Hatfield got up and went to help shovel paths in the great drifts. Pettus had a snow plough and they cleared as much area as they could.

The wind changed and the snow stopped. From freezing the temperature rose and the sun came out. It was February, and spring was not far off, when the range would be softly inviting.

"We're goin' to have a quick melt," said Pettus.

In Hatfield's mind was the gnawing fear that the outlaws might have breached the Double L walls and killed everyone there.

"S'pose we could break a way to Ellington's with the plough?" he asked Pettus.

"Wait a couple hours," replied the rancher.

By late afternoon the whole range was flooded by melted snow. Through gullies the water ran off into the creek and other ditches. "It'll be tough goin', but we can ride now," said Pettus.

It took twice the usual time to reach the Double L. Before they came to the last rise, they could see the camp fires in the sky. The outlaws had returned to the siege after the storm.

Dock Snyder and his aides had their men mounted. As Hatfield breasted eagerly ahead of the main forces led by Pettus, he saw the outlaws start a determined charge at the house. A few guns flamed at them from windows as the defenders sought to check the enemy.

But the bandits were making an overwhelming rush this time. Lines of riders tore up to the walls and threw themselves from their saddles to make the house and hug the outer ramparts where the Double L could not train guns on them.

Hatfield hurried back to Pettus.

"Have the boys line out in two wings and circle in on the house," he ordered. "It's our chance now to surround most of the gunnies."

Heavy volleys blasted in the night. Wild howls rose and the Ranger splashed through the shallow lake of melted snow in the bottom. A shed had been set afire and it gave plenty of light for the attack.

Pettus had sent two wings to left and right, cowboys and ranchers pounding around to circle the foe. The Ranger rushed straight at the enemy as his cohorts closed in.

His Colts opened with blasting fury. He could see the bandit figures against the white walls, tinged by the ruby light. His stentorian voice rose over the din.

"Throw down, outlaws! Surrender to the Texas Rangers."

They heard him and Dock Snyder came galloping around to meet him and challenge him.

Snyder threw up a shotgun and pulled trigger. A chunk of lead cut the Ranger's leather jacket but he let go with his Colt and kept charging. He was upon the bandit general, and at point-blank range sent slugs into the veering Snyder's side. The killer slumped and, as his wild mustang swerved, Dock Snyder crashed from his saddle and lay in the slush.

Pettus and his men were closing in. Heavy guns roared deafeningly.

"Throw down, outlaws!" bellowed Hatfield again.

Black hoods were all around him. The firing stampeded the knots of enemy horses and left their riders stranded. The surprised gunnies snarled as they turned to face the threat at their rear.

In the red light they saw the mighty Ranger and the bristling strength of the charging cowmen. Sinister figures began throwing down guns to raise their hands and beg for mercy. . . .

* * * * *

GUS WATTS dropped his glass and sniffed violently as the tall Ranger glided through the back door of the saloon. There were two men with Watts. The rest of the chief's bodyguard had gone to fight with Dock Snyder.

Not finding Watts with the outlaws captured at the Double L, the Ranger had frightened information out of a couple of cowed prisoners. He had learned that Watts had sat out the blizzard in a nearby cave hideout south of the ranch with the others. But when it had become possible to ride again, Gus Watts had set out for his home. He loved his creature comforts and he had left the crushing of Ellington to Dock Snyder.

Hatfield had also found that Jeff Byler and Beans had made home only a few

jumps ahead of Snyder and his pursuing advance guard. The bandit leaders had guessed what Beans' escape must mean to them and had picked up Byler's trail in the first rays of the dawn. Snyder had struck hard and fast and boxed in the Double L so that Newt Ellington had been unable to send out an alarm. Now the Ranger faced the fat storekeeper.

"The jig's up, Watts," drawled the Ranger, standing in the rear of the saloon with feet spread wide. "Snyder is dead and we captured most of yore gang. The storm held us back but it also chased you and yore bunch off till it slacked. We made it in the nick."

Even as he spoke, the Ranger noticed that tacked to the walls of the room, were several of the "Wanted" circulars which Gus Watts had printed about Hatfield.

Hatfield gripped a double-barreled shotgun in his slim hands and the three there knew his speed. They stood rigid, intently watching him. Gus Watts was behind the bar with his fat hands on the wide plank counter. His eyes quailed.

"I've worked it all out," continued Hatfield. "I savvy what yuh were after in the strip. But yuh're licked. Come out from behind there. Yuh're goin' with me. I aim to see yuh stretch hemp for all yuh've done. Yuh planned Colonel Muller's shootin' and tried for Newt Ellington and Mark Pettus. I got plenty of witnesses who will testify against yuh."

Watts licked his lips and snuffled. He moved stiffly, like an automaton.

One of the bodyguards, thinking he was protected by his companion, threw himself in a crouch and pulled a Colt. The shotgun roared and the bullet missed Hatfield by a yard. Both gunnies were slashed by spreading buck and Hatfield flung the shotgun aside as Gus Watts ducked behind a barrel and came up shooting.

A bullet shrieked close to the Ranger's ear. The big Colt was in his hand, blurred by his speed. In his gray-green eyes was the image of Watts' twisted red face as the tall officer lifted his thumb and the heavy revolver pushed against his palm.

Just over the mayor's snub nose a blue hole appeared. Watts had been hit in the head and his arms flopped as his gun went off again and the slug thudded dully in the opposite wall. The fat chief rolled off the bar and fell heavily. The tall Ranger ran lightly around to check up.

* * * * *

CAPTAIN BILL McDOWELL was immensely pleased.

"Yes, Hatfield, I had yore wire from the west. Yuh done a great job in the strip."

"Thank yuh, suh. . . Jeff Byler's hitchin' up with Amanda Ellington. The folks out there aim to organize their county this spring. Yuh see, the big outlaw who went by the handle of Dock Snyder had killed a New Mexico sheriff of that name. It seems that New Mexico had the same idea we did and sent the real Snyder to the strip to chase bandits and collect taxes so's to cinch a hold on the territory. But the hombre who posed as Sheriff Snyder caught that officer in the mountain passes on his way over, killed him, and took his place. When Mark Pettus asked for information on Dock Snyder the New Mexico authorities wired a reply that Snyder was an accredited peace officer, not savvyin' he was dead and that an outlaw was in his shoes. Gus Watts was chief of it all. Watts' and Snyder's killers are dead."

McDowell nodded. Rangers always gave a man a chance to surrender before shooting. Desperate outlaws often took advantage of this to get off the first shot.

"Soon as I had yore wire sayin' yuh'd settled things out there," went on McDowell, "I took it up with the Governor. They been telegraphin' back and forth and this mornin' just before yuh reported back he sent me word that it looks like our good neighbor New Mexico will yield the disputed strip. So that county will be a Lone Star outfit. It's thanks to you, Hatfield."

Ranger law reigned supreme and Jim Hatfield had carried it to the Far West even in the dead of the icy winter.

McDowell rattled a sheaf of reports. What was done was accomplished, but there was always something else to tackle.

"Trouble on the Rio Grande, Hatfield," he said. "I'd send another man but it looks mighty serious. Right now it's hot as the doors of Hades down there."

"That suits me fine, Cap'n." The Ranger grinned. "It may thaw me out some."

Not long after the old captain watched his star investigator ride from Austin on the golden sorrel and with Hatfield surged the Ranger might, power of Texas.

Cal hit Dave Yancey with the fury of a bolt from the sky

SLOW MAN FROM KENTUCKY

By HASCAL GILES

Cal Ferris had plenty to fight for — but if he struck a blow, a bloody cattleman-and-nester war might follow!

CAL FERRIS could feel the eyes of the loungers around the general store run over him in scorn as he whipsawed the weathered buckboard into the loading platform and wrapped the checklines around the brake-handle to keep the two sharp-hipped plow horses at a standstill.

He sat there a moment on the board seat conscious of the enmity in the motionless hot air of a summer noon. River Bend was a cattleman's town, and, until the homesteaders out on Crowfoot Flats had a firmer foothold, Cal knew a farmer must cat-foot his way down the dusty streets and be careful of the people he

jostled. That was the impression fostered by the River Bend ranchers, and too many of the uneasy farmers believed it.

Cal was in favor of making their place safe in Crowfoot Valley by an open declaration of the rights with which a thoughtful government had provided them. But tension was already a straining wire between the two factions, and the older homesteaders at the settlement lived in constant fear of violence. Cal Ferris did little to comfort them, for it was he who had caused much of their anxiety. Only the wise arguments of his aging father, old Andrew Ferris, had held Cal's youthful temper in check.

"Well, dang my hide, boys! Look who's here!" A brawny, sun-burned man in a curl-brimmed hat stood up on the porch, his big hands choosing the out-thrust butts of twin six-guns for a resting place. "It's that yeller-backed clod-hopper from the flats. Dave Yancey will sure have him some fun today."

Pale splotches of anger grew on Cal's flat-planed cheeks as the men on the porch guffawed. They were all friends of Bear Bob Yancey's loud-mouthed son, Dave, and Cal knew what they were expecting. He also knew why they were Dave Yancey's friends.

Bear Bob Yancey's Rocking Chair ranch was the biggest in the county, possessing wealth and power that made it the self-appointed leader of the others. Land formerly used by the Rocking Chair as open range had been claimed more extensively under the new homestead law than any other in Crowfoot Valley, and if the farmers were ever forced to leave it would have to be under the leadership of Bear Bob Yancey.

Cal Ferris raised narrow gray eyes to the face of the big man on the porch and grinned thinly. "One day Dave Yancey will grow up and quit playing games, if he lives that long."

THE cowboy's face sobered and he lumbered forward, cursing. A gaunt, bearded man raised up out of a tilted chair on the porch and caught him by the arm.

"Sit down, Kirby," the oldster said mildly, his squinted eyes probing Cal's face. "They tell me that tall stringy gent is from Kaintucky. Ain't ever see'd a man from Kaintucky that wouldn't fight. Anger burns slow in some men. That's the worst kind. When it finally goes off it's worse than dynamite. Be shore it don't hit you, Kirby."

The bearded man's words of caution held the red-faced puncher back. Cal turned then, reaching beneath the seat for a roll of beaver pelts which he had trapped when the nester train had first arrived in the valley. Cal had saved the valuable furs for something special, not knowing exactly what it would be. Now, he knew.

Elder Dawson had told him last week that Marie Dawson was on her way to the settlement. The old man had left his young daughter behind until he was sure it would be safe for her in their new home. She was to arrive on the six o'clock stage today, and that was Cal's reason for being in River Bend. He wanted to buy a very special gift for a very special young lady. The beaver furs would be traded for the hammered silver bracelet that Cal had seen so often in the big showcase in Thompson's store.

Holding the pelts under his arm, Cal swung to the ground. He picked his way between the sprawled legs of the loungers on the porch and went inside, his eyes skipping rapidly over their insolent faces.

When Cal came back outside fifteen minutes later, he had a small brown package in one hand, and a dreamy smile on his lean, deep-tanned face. His mind was preoccupied, reaching back into his memory to recall the many happy times he had spent with Marie Dawson in Kentucky, and he passed the loungers without a glance as he strode toward the waiting buckboard.

Suddenly the smile froze into disappointment on Cal's lips, and strange, indecisive lights danced in his pale eyes. A man blocked Cal's path to the wagon. He stood at the edge of the boardwalk, his hands on his hips and a disdainful grin on his wide lips. He was about Cal's age and height, but he was heavier through the shoulders and body, and his hips were not so lean. The skin of his broad, jut-jawed face was dark, like his mood, and his eyes were black and hard.

"I been waitin' for you, Ferris," Dave Yancey growled. "Heard yuh was makin' trade with beaver pelts."

Cal Ferris nodded. "That's right, Yancey. What about it?"

Dave Yancey chuckled as if he were debating the question in his mind. Cal faced the cowboy stoically, hot fury turning his eyes to molten lead. Hopeless fury that he could not hide, although he knew how this meeting would end.

The dark-skinned cowboy had ridden rough-shod over Cal Ferris for six months. Dave Yancey had given the young farmer a dozen different reasons to fight him—perhaps to kill him. Cal had backed away from his insulting remarks and overlooked his cowardly practical jokes so many times that it had become a form of sport in River Bend to watch the two men.

It seemed that all the latent dislike that ranchers held for dirt farmers had culminated in a personal feud between Dave Yancey and Cal Ferris, and it was that fact which worried Cal most. Once he accepted Yancey's challenge and fought him, the ranchers might take it as a declaration of hostilities. Individual fights would soon spread to a pitched battle of the masses, cattlemen against nesters.

If that happened, the black loam of Crowfoot Flats would turn to red clay, colored by the blood of Cal's own people, his father and Marie Dawson's father. Peace-loving homesteads would stand little chance against the big-hatted, fast-shooting cowboys who rode the streets of River Bend.

The force that led Dave Yancey to annoy Cal Ferris was an inborn dislike, the age-old hate of cattlemen for the people they called nesters. Until Cal could draw the line on another issue, one that would distract the other ranchers from their natural prejudice and give them no excuse to take up the fight, he would have to swallow his pride, and with it the bullying punishment handed out by Dave Yancey.

"You got a package in your hand there," Dave Yancey said at last. His eyes swerved to the porch and his expression gained smugness when he found the audience attentive. "What did you buy, nester?"

STUBBORNLY Cal's grip tightened on the carefully-wrapped bracelet. He wanted to turn and walk away without replying, for he knew the answer would bring other questions. But he could not leave. Yancey might follow him, grab him by the shoulder. The arrogant cowboy had never yet laid hands on Cal Ferris, and the young farmer wanted to give him no excuse for doing so. If Yancey ever touched him, Cal would smash his fist into that smirking, swarthy face if it plunged the whole Montana territory into war!

In order to shorten the interrogation and escape the embarrassment of his position as soon as possible, Cal told all there was to tell without pausing.

His voice slow and harshly sarcastic, Cal said: "It's a present for my girl, Marie Dawson. She's comin' in on the evenin' stage. It cost me forty dollars—four beaver pelts and eight dollars in cash."

"Oh-ho! The clodhopper's got a gal! They say they grow purty horses and purty women in Kentucky. But yaller men!" Dave Yancey paused until the burst of laughter from the store porch had run out.

The voice of anger was speaking insistently inside of Cal Ferris and a ridge of muscle quivered along his hard jaw.

"Go ahead and hit him, Cal," the voice was saying. "Show him how you used to wade into the river gangs around Louisville. Wipe that silly grin off his face and make him eat his teeth!"

While Cal was measuring the distance to Dave Yancey's chin, a new voice hammered at his conscience. It was low and solemn, the voice of his father:

"I know it's a bitter pill to swallow, Cal, but one punch at Dave Yancey might send Bear Bob and every rancher in the valley gunnin' for a nester. Don't risk it, Cal. While he's callin' you names just remember one thing: sometimes it takes more of a man not to fight, than it does to fight."

His father had said that often, and Cal was never more keenly aware of the truth of those words than he was now.

The grating tones of Dave Yancey pushed all of Cal's inner thoughts aside. Yancey took a step closer to the farmer, and braced his feet menacingly.

"There was a bracelet in Thompson's I been thinkin' of buyin'," Yancey mused loudly. "I reckon today would be a good time to get it so I could meet that little filly from Kentucky myself, and show our hospitality with a gift. You wouldn't have

it already, now would you, Ferris?"

Cal nodded, the anger in him choking off his voice, burning his face and clouding his eyes until he could hardly see the grinning face in front of him. But if Dave Yancey saw the farmer's straining fury, he was unruffled by it.

Scarcely aware of what the man was doing, Cal was moderately surprised when he found Dave Yancey's outthrust palm in front of his face. He looked curiously at the rough hand, his eyes finally focusing on the golden glint of the two double-eagles which Dave Yancey had drawn from his pocket and now held toward him.

"Here's your money, nester," Yancey said. "I'm buyin' that bracelet from you, and I'm darin' you not to sell."

Even through the red clouds of rage that swirled through his mind, Cal could still see a few pertinent truths. It was not the bracelet that Dave Yancey wanted, and the cowboy had no sincere desire to meet Marie Dawson. All he wanted was to show the superiority of a cattleman over a nester. This was another episode in his game of big bad hawk and frightened little rabbit.

But something inside of Cal Ferris rebelled this time. He suddenly saw himself as the hoorawing loungers on the porch saw him—a revolting picture of a quaking pretense of a man! Cal could stand no more of it. It was time for redemption, and the muscles tightened like springs in his sinewy arms as he folded his fists.

"Cal! Cal Ferris!" The voice cut through the tenseness of the air like a whiplash, and a wiry gray-haired man thumped hurriedly down the boardwalk toward the tall farmer.

Turning, Cal saw his father hurrying into the group on the porch, his raw-boned face sagging with worry. The old nester had feared a clash such as this, and had followed Cal to town.

"Best you do as he says, son," Andrew Ferris said wearily. "We don't want no trouble."

FOR a moment it seemed that Cal would hit the cowboy, anyway, but as he turned back to face Dave Yancey, he could feel his father's steel-blue eyes burning against the back of his neck, and he knew what Andrew Ferris was thinking. A man's own personal feelings were small things when measured in the terms of other men's lives.

Slowly, Cal's knotted left fist relaxed into a long, flat hand again. He lifted the two gold coins out of Dave Yancey's palm and shoved the package toward the cowboy.

As the dark-skinned puncher took the parcel, the guffaws on the porch rang out again, and more people began to stop on the boardwalk and stare. But Cal Ferris appeared not to notice them. An eager, dawning light flickered in his pale eyes, and his generous mouth slipped into a drawn smile. For, all at once, he realized this was not another humiliating defeat as it might look to the chuckling onlookers. It was the first step in the victory Cal had sought for months.

Cal Ferris tugged at the waistband of his faded levis, patting the dark flannel shirt in place around his lean hips while he looked hard into the triumphant face of Dave Yancey. Cal was still grinning that cold flat-lipped grin.

"I'm sellin' you a bracelet, Yancey," the nester stated firmly, "but I ain't sellin' you my girl. Stay away from Marie Dawson."

Dave Yancey took a fast step backward in mock fear. "You handin' out a warnin', clodhopper?"

"Stay away from my girl," Cal repeated. Then he turned and motioned to his father and they climbed into the buckboard together. As the raw-boned homesteader and his tall yellow-haired son drove toward the livery stable, Cal was bent close to his father, telling Andrew Ferris the plan his meeting with Dave Yancey had revealed to him. . . .

As was often the case, the incoming stage was two hours late. By the time it swung in sight down the lamp-lighted street, the dusty River Bend thoroughfare had been stirred by many tramping feet. As darkness came, and more men were relieved of their chores, the activity in the little cowtown increased. Cowboys who had drifted in for a drink had stayed to wait for the stage after they heard about Cal Ferris' warning to Dave Yancey.

Cal and his father had mingled little with the other men. They had spent most of the afternoon squatting in the shade of the big live-oak tree behind the livery

stable, whittling on sticks and talking quietly. At dusk they had gone into a restaurant across from the hotel, and when the stage finally pulled into the station beside the saloon, no one seemed to know exactly what had become of the two farmers.

Dave Yancey was right there waiting for the coach to stop. He was standing near the edge of the boardwalk, his heavy legs braced wide and a glittering silver bracelet in his hand. All around him were big-hatted, gun-slung men, laughing and talking and nudging each other in the ribs.

THE leather-faced, dust-covered jehu set his foot against the hand brake and sent up a streamer of dust as he brought the stage to a sliding halt. He looped his reins and jumped to the ground, casting a puzzled eye toward the crowd on the station porch.

He opened the stage door then.

"All out!" he bawled. "Roll out for River Bend!"

A tall, nattily-dressed drummer stepped stiffly to the ground, frowning at the babble of voices that rose around him while he waited for the driver to toss down his sample case. Another man clambered out, but he did not walk immediately away. Instead he raised his hand toward the open door, and slender gloved fingers touched lightly against his palm.

Silence swept away the noise in an instant as the cowboys waited expectantly. Then a stifled gasp of appreciation sounded from many throats as the man handed the girl quickly to the ground.

She was a tiny person, exquisitely firm and rounded. A rich blue riding cape was slung saucily around her straight shoulders, and a small ruffled white bonnet covered just enough of her long curling hair to emphasize its shining black luster. For a moment Marie Dawson stood unmoving, her wide blue eyes slightly bewildered while she stared at the rough-looking men who were crowding toward her.

"Yuh shore heard right about Kentucky, Dave," a coarse voice ventured. "I don't know about the horses, but the women are all they claim."

Dave Yancey took the rising color in Marie Dawson's creamy cheeks as his cue. He stepped toward the girl, sweeping his big white Stetson from his kinky black hair.

"Welcome to River Bend, Miss Dawson," the cowboy said warmly. "I'm Dave Yancey of the Rockin' Chair Ranch, here to escort yuh wherever yuh might want to go. I'm takin' Cal Ferris' place. I think mebbe he changed his mind about meetin' yuh."

Momentarily, the men had forgotten the tall nester and their own reason for being here. But now all eyes swung around the dim porch, and they saw nothing of Cal Ferris.

"But—but I don't understand," Marie Dawson said timidly. "You don't even know me."

Dave Yancey reached quickly for the girl's arm, remembering the gift he held for her. "Just showin' our hospitality, Miss Dawson," he chuckled, slipping the bracelet in place.

Marie's eyes fell to the silver band on her arm, and her bewilderment merged with astonishment. And, while her full red lips moved soundlessly in the search for words, Dave Yancey folded her hand in his and walked away from the coach. The girl followed numbly, walking like one in a trance.

"Wait, Yancey!" The voice that lashed out from the shadows of the alley beside the stage station had the keen, cutting edge of a knife. Cal Ferris stepped into view in the orange glow of the windows.

Again the raucous crowd was quiet, waiting. A ragged path cleared before Cal Ferris as he crossed the walk and stepped down in front of Dave Yancey.

It was apparent that the cowboy had not expected him. A look which he'd never seen in the tall farmer's pale eyes before made Yancey drop Marie Dawson's arm. The girl's eyes suddenly became alive and she started to speak to Cal, but old Andrew Ferris appeared from another cluster of shadows, whispering in her ear as he led Marie away.

"Back home," Cal Ferris began softly, "when we tell a man to leave our women alone, he does that."

Dave Yancey considered facing Cal Ferris a common occurrence, and his confidence had become a habit.

"Well, what are you goin' to do about it?" he said defiantly.

Cal's answer was prompt. He hit Dave Yancey in the mouth, his knotted left fist coming like a bolt from the sky. That first blow had the fury and planning of months behind it. Cal's hard knuckles ground through Yancey's heavy lips, splitting and cracking the teeth beneath them.

Dave Yancey sat down hard in the powdery dust of the street, his dark eyes wide and his long jaw sagging in utter disbelief. From behind Cal there came a roar such as the farmer had never heard before from the throats of men. It was first a cry of doubt, and then a crescendo of verification. It was true! Cal Ferris had struck Dave Yancey! After all these months he had hit him, and had knocked him down!

Shoulders hunched, fists poised, his long arms throbbing with power begging to be unleashed, Cal Ferris waited for Dave Yancey to rise. The swarthy cowboy shook his groggy head, pushing himself rapidly to his feet, growling unintelligibly.

Yancey got a big fist cocked for delivery, but Cal's fist was already on its way. It landed on Yancey's jaw like a gunshot. A savage blow, almost inhuman in force and speed. Yancey staggered backward, tottering. Cal glided toward the cowboy. He ran straight into Yancey's swinging fist, and the punch lifted the nester's head a little, hurting him. But Cal kept walking.

He hit the cowboy on the nose. It was a short punch, aimed straight. Blood spurted as the nose flattened and then inflated again. Cal's left hand thudded under Yancey's chin, jarring the man, pulling him up on his toes and then slamming him flat on his back.

Rolling over, Yancey pushed upward. On his feet, one sharp blow from him put a blue lump under Cal's right eye, but did not stagger him. Nothing could have stopped the tall farmer that night. The fight had been born from deep inside him. His fists were mere messengers for hidden voices.

Cal's shoulders wobbled from left to right as both his hands smashed outward in one-two cadence—under the cowboy's eyes this time—and Yancey was down again. His face was chopped up, bleeding. He arose much slower. He got to his knees, and Cal grew tired of waiting. His right smashed down at that blunted dark chin, and Yancey fell forward on his face. He lay there breathing hard, and mumbling in the dust.

KNOWING the cowboy could not stand under his own power, Cal turned away. Abruptly, the awed yells on the porch subsided and there was a hurried shuffling of feet.

"Here, here!" a booming voice yelled. "What in tarnation is causin' all the hollerin'?"

A towering, bull-chested man cleared himself a passage to the edge of the boardwalk. He had a wide, heavy-jowled face and shaggy gray hair that fell from under his hat like the frosted fur of a grizzly.

The big man's eyes touched the wilted form of Dave Yancey on the ground, and Cal Ferris felt a momentary wave of uneasiness as Bear Bob Yancey continued to stare at his beaten son. As the silence hung on, Cal was about to attempt some sort of an answer to the big rancher's question when another man spoke.

It was the gaunt, bearded oldster whom Cal had seen at the general store earlier that day. "Yore boy Dave just got blazes whupped out of him, Bob!" he said. "Him and Cal Ferris got into a row over some woman that come in on the stage."

"Hmf," Bear Bob Yancey snorted. "Look's like he bit off more'n he could chaw."

The big rancher stamped away then, leaving the others to take care of Dave Yancey.

Not a word had been said about nesters or cattlemen. For, as long as men remain young and headstrong, women will be causing fights among them, and older heads give the situation little thought. But Cal Ferris knew he had won more than a trifling triumph. Some of the cowboys on the porch grinned at him, as he walked rapidly away to join his father and Marie Dawson where they were waiting at the livery stable, and the scorn was gone from their smiles.

●

Jim Hatfield at His Fighting Best in THE KIOWA KILLER, Next Issue's Exciting Complete Novel by JACKSON COLE!

The next thing Sheriff MacLoyd knew the cold edge of an old corn knife was pressing against his throat

DOC SWAP DUPES A DUPER

By BEN FRANK

You can't beat the tradin' hombre when it comes to making a series of exchanges — and providing excitement to boot!

WHISTLING softly, his round whiskery face wearing a pleased expression, Old Doc Swap waddled around his neat cottage, which stood at the edge of Dry Bluffs, admiring how handsome it looked with the morning sun gleaming on the new coat of white paint. The entire job hadn't cost him a cent. He'd done the work himself, and he'd swapped an old dry cow for the paint. Yep, he reckoned he had a right to feel pleased.

On the second trip around the house, he stopped whistling, and a frown pulled at his face. It had just occurred to him that he'd been so busy painting these last four days that he'd got way behind in his swapping.

Jamming his fancy pearl-gray Stetson—he'd swapped a wind-broken old horse for

the hat and considered that deal one of the high-lights of his career—down to his red ears, he headed along the one street toward the jail. He reckoned it was time he checked up on Sheriff MacLoyd, who was his rival in the two occupations dearest to his heart—swappin' and fiddle playin'. For forty years, Doc and MacLoyd had been in a continual wrangle, each trying to best the other in some kind of a trade.

Wheezing a little from his rapid pace, the old swapper climbed the wooden steps of the cracker-box jail and stepped into MacLoyd's two-by-four office. What he saw froze him to a standstill just inside the sagging door.

The sheriff's office had undergone a transformation. Cobwebs no longer decorated the four corners of the room. The sheriff's spur-scarred desk, hitherto piled with old dodgers, cracker crumbs and odds and ends, was as neat as a new horseshoe. The battered and oft-missed spittoon no longer stood on the floor. The one window had been cleaned of its countless fly-specks and now shone like a new dollar. And, for the first time since Doc could remember, the pine floor had been swept and scrubbed.

Then Doc's wide eyes fixed on the bean-pole sheriff himself. MacLoyd wore a new pair of pants and a bright blue shirt with fancy pearl buttons. He stood before a new mirror, which had been hung behind the desk, studying himself with a satisfied air and twisting at his handle-bar mustache with his left hand. In his right hand, he clutched a large green comb. Never before had Doc known Sheriff MacLoyd to bother about combing his mop of gray hair, with or without a mirror.

DOC managed to get enough air into his lungs to cough discreetly, and MacLoyd turned and stared down at him. A look of mingled disgust and disappointment filled his thin, bony face.

"Oh, it's you," he said in the kind of a voice he'd likely use on a stray dog that had fallen out of a garbage can.

"Shore, it's me," Doc bristled. "Who'd yuh think it was, yuh long-legged ole buzzard?"

"I figured it might be Miss Theo Hempsweet."

The name had a familiar ring to Doc, but he was too dazed to think. He took off his fancy hat and wiped the sweat off his bald head with a shaking hand.

"Who's that?"

MacLoyd's thin face turned scornful at Doc's dumbness. "Miss Theo Hempsweet is one of the greatest portrait painters in America. In fact, the greatest in the hull world."

Doc remembered then where he had heard the name. His sister, Ursula, who lived in Philadelphia, had had her portrait painted by the famous Theo Hempsweet.

"What's she doin' here in Dry Bluffs?" he croaked.

"She's here to paint my picture. She took one look at me and says, 'Yuh're the true Western type of lawman. Yore figure an' face—'"

"Would sour milk!" Doc finished for him.

MacLoyd remained unperturbed. In fact, he even smiled as a far-away, dreamy look came into his pale eyes.

"Fer three days now," he went on blissfully, "Miss Theo and me have been ridin' here and yon over Bluff County, lookin' fer a suitable background fer me to pose while she paints my picture. She makes sketches of hills and trees and things. We even rode up to Sugar Creek Pass and—"

In spite of the feeling of weakness that had come over him, Doc cut in with, "Got to thinkin' about yore watch, Sheriff. Figured we might work up a swap."

Now, Doc hadn't given a thought to the watch until this moment, but he had to see if he could shake the sheriff out of his dreamy-eyed daze.

MacLoyd pulled the tin dollar-watch from the pocket of the blue shirt with his bony fingers.

"Want this, do yuh?" he murmured.

Doc had a great mistrust of time-pieces and always told time by the sun, but he nodded his head vigorously.

"Got a ole razor I might swap fer it."

"Here," MacLoyd said, holding the watch toward Doc, "I'll just give it to yuh."

For a moment, Doc figured he would faint. In the forty years he'd been around the sheriff, he'd never known him willingly to give anything away. Doc braced himself against the door sill. He didn't take the watch. He just stared at it until

he felt strong enough to walk, then turned and fled through the door.

Staggering down the steps, he almost ran into a woman. She was young and pretty and red headed. Her hard, bright blue eyes gave him a look that would curl the petals on a sunflower.

"You drunks ought to be kept in jail!" she snapped.

She carried a roll of paper under one arm and clutched a small box with her other hand. She went on into the jail office angrily, and Doc Swap realized suddenly that he had just met the famous Theo Hempsweet.

As he waddled homeward, he felt as if he'd been hit by an earthquake. He thought what life would be like if he couldn't get into a soaring, long-winded swap with Sheriff MacLoyd, and shuddered. Right then, he knew he had to do something that would bring the sheriff back to earth, and that, he realized, would be quite a chore with Miss Theo Hempsweet wanting to paint MacLoyd's portrait.

Whenever Doc Swap had a problem to solve, there was just one thing to do—go to Sugar Valley on a "swappin' spree." Nesters were settling up the valley, and nesters were swappers. Swapping sharpened Doc's mind, and he reckoned his mind needed a good whetting up now if it ever did.

TWENTY minutes later, he was on his way, sitting on the sagging spring seat of his covered wagon in which he carried his swapping goods, and prodding his fat, sleek bays into a fast walk along the Sugar Creek Trail. He was a good five miles out of Dry Bluffs before he realized that he'd left in such a hurry that he'd forgotten to bring any swapping goods along. Swearing softly into his ragged whiskers, he drove on until he came to the creek.

Doc pulled his team up to let them drink, and his keen eyes swept about and fixed on a huge rattlesnake, sunning himself on a flat rock. Doc had no use for sidewinders, or, in fact, any kind of rattlesnakes. He wrapped the lines about the empty whip socket, climbed stiffly to the ground and found a sizable rock with a sharp edge.

Cautiously he moved along the creek bank until he stood not far from the snake. He heaved the rock with surprising accuracy, and its sharp edge neatly sliced the rattler in two. After that, he finished the snake off in a hurry and then, with the aid of his pocket knife, helped himself to the long string of rattles.

Feeling downright pleased, the old swapper waddled back to his wagon, climbed in and drove on. A few minutes later, he came to Dad Blamit's side-hill cabin.

Dad Blamit was an oldster with a long beard, a perpetual back-ache and bleary eyes. When he wasn't trying to learn a tune on his fiddle, he raised vegetables in his garden down by the creek. At the moment, he sat on the shady side of his cabin, eyeing his fiddle and swearing fervently.

Doc waddled over to him, smiling happily. He knew that Dad Blamit couldn't play worth shucks, but made a suggestion.

"Why don't yuh saw me off a tune?" Doc Swap said.

The old man's white whiskers bristled angrily.

"A dad-blamed cowpuncher from the Double O was here yesterday. The dad-blamed hoss-thief stole the rattle out of my fiddle. Can't play a tune without a dad-blamed rattlesnake rattle inside my fiddle to give her zip. Dad-blamed cowpuncher ought to be hung from a tree."

Doc's fat fingers came out of a pocket, clutching the rattle he'd picked up a few minutes before.

"Doc," Dad Blamit wheezed, "I'll give yuh a dollar fer that."

Doc was a swapper and had no use for money. Shaking his head, he slowly returned the rattle to the pocket.

"Two dollars?" Dad Blamit asked anxiously.

"Might swap," Doc murmured.

For the rattle, Doc got a basket of onions, a rake with a broken handle, a slab of bacon and an old Sunday paper to boot. Not that Doc was interested much in Sunday papers. He was a great hand for boot in any kind of a trade.

The old swapper came to a side trail, and after a moment's hesitation, followed it until he came to Homer Prutt's bachelor shack. Homer invented things. The evidence of his work lay scattered about his weedy front yard in the form of many

weather-beaten gadgets, none of which had ever proved successful. The man himself sat in the sun on the front porch of his cabin, his bony chin cupped in his long fingers, the seat of his pants resting on a somewhat soiled but quite fancy pillow which he had won at a carnival. He didn't lift his head when Doc slowly approached.

"H'lo, Homer," Doc greeted.

Still Homer sat with his head down, his mind a million miles away.

"Hey!" Doc said, giving him a shake.

Homer came out of his trance and blinked up at Doc out of startled, red-rimmed eyes.

"Sorry, Doc," he said apologetically. "I been doin' some thinkin' about a contraption I ought to invent." Then, excitedly, "What happens to a man when he is worried and uncomfortable?"

"Why, he tries to get hisself un-worried," Doc stammered.

"Exactly!" Homer stood up and clutched Doc's arm. "And he can't eat so good, and he loses weight! The same thing happens to pigs!"

"Do tell?" Doc murmured.

"Doc," Homer went on, "how is the best way to keep a pig happy an' unworried so's he won't lose weight?"

DOC shook his head in mild bewilderment.

"Scratch his back!" Homer declared triumphantly. "Ain't nothin' he likes better'n that. I'm goin' to invent a automatic pig back scratcher. Doc, I reckon at last I've thunk up a idea that will make me rich and famous!"

"No doubt about it," Doc agreed.

He reached into his covered wagon and came up with the broken rake.

"Just the thing yuh need fer yore invention, Homer," he went on blandly. "Nothin' could scratch a pig's back better'n this. Yuh could fix some kind of a jigger to pull it back an' forth."

"How much yuh want for that?" Homer demanded.

"Wouldn't sell it," Doc replied sadly. "But since yuh're goin' to make somethin' useful out of it, I might swap."

Homer Prutt got the broken rake. For it he willingly parted with the fancy sofa pillow, a box of colored pencils, an oil lantern, and three large glass jars, one of which was about half-full of axle grease.

Doc made his next stop at Ad Trotter's tar-papered shack. Ad was a great rocking-chair man, and at the moment, he sat in his squeaky rocker in the shade of an unhappy looking oak, staring sadly at a five-gallon wooden keg.

"A right nice day to cut weeds and fix fence," Doc greeted.

Ad shuddered slightly, and wiped a horny hand across his leathery face.

"Doc," he said, quickly changing the subject from work to something more to his liking, "I'm in a fix. Yesterday I was down to the creek and found a lot of wild grapes. And now, what do yuh reckon?"

"No idea," Doc murmured.

"This here keg has been et up by termites. A man can't make himself no animated grape juice without he's got something to let the grapes set in a few weeks."

"Got just what yuh need," Doc said, digging into his covered wagon. "Termites won't eat these here things."

He pulled out the two large empty glass jars.

Ad's eyes brightened. "Doc, beats all how yuh allus seem to have what a man needs," he said admiringly.

Doc's keen eyes were busily searching for swapping goods.

"Ad," he murmured, "I sure hate to part with them two jars. Figured on usin' 'em myself, but—"

Shortly after this, Doc drove away from the tar-papered shack, minus the two glass jars. He had added to his collection of goods, an alarm clock that wouldn't run, a large bundle of old feed sacks, a pair of riding boots, a gallon can of kerosene, and an old worn-out broom to boot.

It was getting along toward late afternoon, so Doc headed his bays toward his favorite camping spot on the right bank of Sugar Creek. Just as he came in sight of the timber that bordered the creek, he saw two riders coming from between the trees. One of them was a woman. Doc didn't get a very good look at the woman, for she turned and rode to the east, but he would have bet his fancy hat against a lead dime that she was the famous Theo Hempsweet.

The man rode on toward Doc at a fast canter. He wore twin six-guns in black

leather holsters. When he came even with Doc, he lifted his head, and Doc caught a glimpse of a thin black mustache and a pair of steel gray eyes with a long crooked nose between. Doc didn't much like the looks of the man. Vaguely he wondered if Theo Hempsweet had found another Western type to paint. The owl-hooter type.

That night, by the light of the lantern, he discovered that the alarm clock needed a good cleaning, so he used a little kerosene for that. As he worked, he made inventory of the day's accumulations. Starting with exactly nothing, he now had an old Sunday paper, a slab of bacon, a box of colored pencils, a lantern, pillow, kerosene, a bundle of old sacks, a pair of riding boots, an old broom, one large glass jar with some axle grease in it. Also, he had an alarm clock which was ticking away like new. And a basket of onions.

ORDINARILY, he would have felt well satisfied with himself, but not this night. As yet he hadn't figured any way to shake Sheriff MacLoyd out of his daze and get him back into a swapping mood.

Swearing softly, Doc picked up the Sunday paper and began leafing through it. A picture in the magazine section caught his eyes. It was a picture of a man with a mustache and a crooked nose. He looked a lot like the man Doc had seen talking to Miss Theo Hempsweet.

Doc sat up suddenly and stared at the headlines: THE MAX CHICO GANG RIDES AGAIN. He read the article quickly by the light of the flickering lantern. It seemed that this gang had the nasty habit of looting banks. Also, it seemed that one member of the gang was a girl, description unknown.

Doc slowly shook his bald head. "A feller's a fool to jump at conclusions," he muttered to himself.

Thinking things over that next morning, Doc decided he wanted to send a telegram, so he headed back along the trail toward the cut-off that led to the little town of Red Dog. Just as he reached the cut-off, he met Sheriff MacLoyd and Miss Theo Hempsweet. He knew for sure then that the girl had been talking to the crooked-nosed man the evening before, because she rode the same horse now as she had ridden then.

The dazed look still filled the sheriff's bony face. He likely wouldn't have seen Doc at all if Doc's team and wagon hadn't blocked the road.

Doc swept off his fancy hat and made a deep bow.

"Right nice mornin' to be hossback ridin'," he observed.

MacLoyd scowled. Miss Hempsweet didn't seem to remember that Doc was the man she had accused of being drunk the day before. She smiled and tossed her pretty red head.

"Why don't you introduce me?" she murmured to MacLoyd.

The sheriff's scowl deepened.

"Yuh don't want to be introduced to no ole hoss-thief like him," he growled. "He's Doc Swap."

"He's the true Western type of doctor," Miss Hempsweet began. "He's wonderful."

MacLoyd's face turned slightly pale, and Doc grinned happily. Nothing he liked better than to see MacLoyd disturbed. And then he remembered why he was going to Red Dog.

"Nice to have met yuh, Miss Hempsweet," he said. "Got to be goin'. G'by." And he jogged his bays into an unwilling trot.

The town of Red Dog lay in the bright sun—a general store, a faded depot, cattle pens and three unpainted houses. Doc left his covered wagon behind the railroad depot, waddled around to the front of the building and went in. He found old Ticker Twill, the runty, bandy-legged agent, standing over a red-hot stove, stirring some concoction in an iron pot.

"Ain't it hot enough without a fire?" Doc asked.

Ticker turned his streaming face toward Doc.

"Can't make no Mulligan stew without a fire."

"Don't smell exactly like Mulligan stew," Doc observed.

"Ain't got no onions to put in it," Ticker returned bitterly. "Ain't a onion in town. Likely ain't a onion in forty miles. I'd swap my soul fer a couple of onions."

Without a word, Doc went back to his covered wagon and returned with the basket of onions.

Ticker's sweaty face lost its scowl.

"Doc," he wheezed. "Them is onions!"

"Ain't apples," Doc smiled blandly. "Might work us up a swap. Might let yuh have 'em for sending a telegram. 'Course, I'd have to have a little boot."

After Doc had promised that the telegram would be no longer than ten words, the deal was made. The telegram went to Doc's sister, Ursula, in Philadelphia, and stated:

"THEO HEMPSWEET IS RED HEADED, SLIM, RIDES HORSE. REPLY IMMEDIATELY."

For boot, Doc got a huge almost new ink eraser.

The depot with its fire was too hot for Doc, so he wandered across the dusty road to the store. He found Stony Stewart, the proprietor, on his knees, poking a long stick through a hole in the foundation.

"Lose somethin'?" Doc asked.

STONY turned a seamy, red face toward Doc. He swore with calm furiousness.

"My ole tomcat has hid hisself under there," he answered. "Blasted cat climbed up on a shelf and knocked off my alarm clock. Busted it into a dozen pieces. Got to have a alarm clock so's I can wake up and meet the mornin' mail train. I'm goin' to learn that cat a thing or two!"

He returned to his poking, and Doc returned to the covered wagon. A minute later, he was back with the alarm clock he'd cleaned up the night before.

Stony's eyes fixed on the clock. "Got to have that thing, Doc. How much?"

For the clock, Doc got a small sack of flour, a bag of dried prunes, a bar of sweet-smelling soap, an assortment of leftover firecrackers, an option on the tomcat (if he could catch him) and a can of sardines. Not that Doc was any hand to eat sardines.

Smiling happily, the old swapper waddled outside, opened the can of sardines and set them in front of the hole in the foundation.

Presently the tomcat came out to eat the sardines.

"Nice kitty," Doc said, picked him up and carried him, along with the other articles, to the covered wagon. Doc wasn't the kind to leave any of his swapping goods behind.

Ticker Twill, the agent, stuck his head through a window of the depot.

"Got a answer to yore telegram, Doc?" he bawled.

Doc remembered the red-hot stove and shuddered slightly.

"Read it," he said.

"ROT STOP THEO IS TOO FAT AND OLD TO RIDE A HORSE. URSULA.

So the red-headed girl was an impostor, Doc realized. He climbed into his wagon and headed at a fast clip back toward Sugar Valley. He reckoned now he'd jar the sheriff out of his daze.

He intended to drive straight back to Dry Bluffs, but when he reached the trail that followed the creek, he found the girl sitting on a flat rock with an easel propped up in front of her. He climbed down from his wagon, swept his fancy hat from his head and bowed grandly.

"Fine day fer makin' pictures," he murmured.

Miss Hempsweet eyed him coldly, even after he got the fancy sofa pillow from the wagon and put in on the rock for her to sit on.

"I'm sketching the Sugar Hump Mountains," she said.

Doc stared at her work. "Mighty purty," he praised.

Then he noticed a roll of paper lying near the easel, and he had a sudden notion that he'd like to have a look at those papers.

"Like cats?" he asked hopefully.

Miss Hempsweet nodded her red head and picked up a pencil.

Doc waddled to his wagon, got hold of the tomcat with one hand and reached into the jar of axle grease with the other. Before he turned around, he'd smeared some of the black grease over the cat's back.

Miss Hempsweet took the cat in her arms and turned startled eyes up to Doc. She lifted a hand. It was covered with grease.

"Dad-blame that cat!" Doc said. "He's been pokin' around in my axle grease." He reached into a pocket and pulled out the bar of scented soap. "Mebbe yuh'd like to go down to the creek and wash off that grease?"

The girl took the soap and disappeared among the trees that bordered the creek.

Immediately Doc unrolled the papers. There were two of them. The first was a neat map of Dry Bluffs. Every building along the Main Street was clearly marked

—the courthouse, jail, feed store, bank, etc. The second sheet held a remarkably accurate map of Bluff County, showing all landmarks carefully drawn. But the thing that interested Doc most was the red line that reached from the town of Dry Bluffs to Sugar Creek Pass, following the trail known as the Shortcut.

DOC lifted his head and listened. He could hear the girl splashing around in the water. For a fat man, he moved fast. He got the ink eraser and the colored pencils from his wagon, returned to the flat rock and set to work on the map. By the time the so-called Miss Hempsweet returned with clean hands, the two papers were rolled up again and lying exactly where she'd left them, and Doc was still admiring her sketch of the Sugar Hump Mountains.

"Here's your soap," she said.

"Keep it," Doc said. "Yuh can have the cat and the pillow, if yuh want 'em."

A few minutes later, he headed on toward Dry Bluffs. As soon as he was out of Miss Hempsweet's sight, he stopped his team, climbed to the ground and returned to a place where he could see her, but not be seen himself.

He didn't have long to wait. A man came riding up from the west. The man with the mustache, crooked nose and the two six-guns. The girl gave him the roll of paper, and the man turned his horse and rode rapidly back the way he had come.

Doc, the wheels in his head spinning, waddled back to his wagon and drove on. He reckoned he had some news now that would bring the sheriff back to earth for sure. As luck would have it, he met the sheriff at the next turn in the road.

Today MacLoyd was driving his old rattle-trap buggy. He still wore the new clothes and the dazed look. He would have passed Doc up if Doc hadn't pulled his wagon crossways of the road.

MacLoyd's pale eyes slowly filled with anger.

"Yuh ole fat toad!" he bellowed, "Get yore outfit outa my way!"

"Sheriff," Doc said calmly. "Yuh're bein' made a fool of—which is easy to do, considerin' how near yuh are one to begin with."

"One side!" MacLoyd roared. "In the name of the law!"

"That girl ain't Theo Hempsweet. She's here on some kind of dirty business. She's a fake."

"One more word about that sweet, innocent little girl," MacLoyd choked, "and I'll let sunlight into that fat carcass!"

"Why, yuh ole buzzard-nosed, lop-eared—"

Doc's voice sputtered to a stop. Whenever he got riled to a certain point, he could never talk.

MacLoyd took advantage of Doc's silence. He turned out of the road, drove around Doc's wagon and headed on up the trail lickety-split.

Doc stared after him. It had never occurred to him that the sheriff would refuse to believe him.

"The ole fool!" he exploded. "He ought to be took."

He drove on, snorting like a bull with one horn caught in a knothole. He reckoned he hadn't been so mad about anything for a good twenty years. He was still fuming when he came to Ed Lunt's homestead, about noon.

Ed, a scowl on his long face, met Doc at the door.

"Reckon yuh're out of luck today, Doc," he said. "My wife has done run out of flour and we ain't got nothin' but some buggy cornmeal to go with our hogmeat. I'm mighty sorry."

Doc returned to his wagon and came back to the house with the sack of flour under his arm.

For the flour, Doc got his dinner, three hens, a ham, an old lariat and a corn knife to boot—not that Doc intended ever to cut any corn.

But he had to have boot, or a swap wasn't a swap.

The Lunts had two small children, and Doc liked kids, so he hung around for sometime, playing three-old-cat with the youngsters. At last, he tore himself away and headed back toward Dry Bluffs.

His round shoulders slumped, and his whiskery face wore a deep scowl. For nothing, he had accumulated a Sunday paper, bacon, colored pencils, a lantern, kerosene, a bundle of sacks, a broom, ink eraser, bag of prunes, firecrackers, boots, a glass jar with axle grease in it, three hens, a ham, lariat, and a corn knife. But he hadn't solved his major problem—how

to get MacLoyd back into a swapping mood.

For once, Doc reckoned, a "swappin' spree" in Sugar Valley had failed to sharpen his mind. Yet, there was one ray of hope, a thin, red line on a piece of paper, but it was a mighty dim ray.

AND then he met Sheriff MacLoyd again. The bony man's face was as white as a bark-peeled sycamore, and his pale eyes bugged until you could hang doughnuts on them. The old horse hitched to the sheriff's buggy was covered with lather and was puffing like a mountain climbing locomotive.

MacLoyd leaped from the buggy and began to climb into Doc's covered wagon.

"My hoss is done fer!" he wheezed. "Head them bays fer Sugar Creek Pass, Doc. Make 'em shake a leg!"

"Now, looky here," Doc protested. "What's all the excitement?"

"The Chico gang has just robbed the Dry Bluffs bank!" the sheriff chattered. "My deputy, Ham Brady, just come along with a posse and tol' me. He's headin' fer the pass. They didn't have no extra saddle hoss, so I tried to follow 'em in my buggy. Couldn't keep up. Pound some life into them bays!"

"Now," Doc said soothingly, "let's don't get all worked up."

"Them outlaws won't likely know about the shortcut. Ham's takin' it. He ought beat 'em to the pass. I got to be there fer the finish, or people will say I'm no good."

"I reckon, you and me'll head fer Dead End Canyon," Doc said, slapping his bays into a trot.

MacLoyd's bony hand dropped toward his six-gun.

"Sugar Creek pass," he bellowed, "or I'll blow yore—"

The next thing he knew, something cold was pressing against the back of his neck. It was the blade of an old corn knife, and Doc held the handle in one fat hand.

"Just drop yore gun on the floor," Doc said coolly, "'fore I cut yore brain-less noggin loose from yore spine. We're goin' to Dead End Canyon!"

They went to Dead End Canyon. On the way, they met Ike Johnson, a settler, riding a flop-eared mule.

Doc slowed up. "Ike!" he yelled. "You got any money in the Dry Bluffs bank?"

Ike nodded. "Right at three hundred dollars, I reckon."

"Then yuh'll want to help us round up the owl-hooters what just robbed the bank," Doc said. "Yuh get some of the settlers and meet us at Dead End Canyon."

"Don't listen—" MacLoyd began hoarsely.

Doc reached for the corn knife, and the sheriff shut up pronto.

When they reached the canyon, Doc stopped his outfit behind a clump of cedars near the mouth of the canyon. He fished out the fire-crackers and waddled toward the canyon. A strong wind at his back almost tore the fancy Stetson from his head.

"Come on," he panted. "Mebbe we can bluff 'em."

In the distance, they saw six riders coming toward them from the depths of the canyon.

"Oh, oh!" Doc muttered. "They've found out they rid into a place with no openin' at the other end. We got to keep 'em holed up in there till Ike and the boys get here."

MacLoyd blinked rapidly and decided that Doc knew what he was talking about, after all. They climbed up on a rocky ledge overlooking the canyon.

"Start shootin'," Doc said, and MacLoyd began to blaze away with his lone six-gun. Then Doc began lighting fire-crackers and tossing them along the steep wall of the canyon.

To the outlaws, the noise pounding back and forth between the rock walls sounded as if a fifty-man posse had trapped them in the dead-end canyon. They hastily retreated around a bend out of sight.

MacLoyd glanced up worriedly.

"I'm about out of ammunition," he panted.

Doc stared at the empty sack in his fat hands.

"I am out of firecrackers, too," he said unhappily.

At that moment, the owl-hooters made another sally around the bend of the canyon.

Doc shoved to his feet and sniffed at the wind.

"Blowin' just right," he said. "Shoot yore last shells, while I try somethin' else."

BY THE time the old swapper reached his covered wagon, he was blowing like a broken down race horse. He dug out the bundle of sacks and tied them around the old broom with a length of the lariat. Then he fastened the broom to the back of his covered wagon with the rest of the rope. He poured kerosene over the sacks and struck a match to the improvised torch. He leaped into his wagon and drove his bays at a fast clip across the mouth of the canyon, dragging the flaming torch behind.

The oil-soaked sacks left a trail of fire in the tall, dry grass. The wind whipped the fire into the canyon. The flames roared and leaped, and the outlaws' horses, refusing to face that wall of fire, plunged with their cursing riders back to the very end of Dead End Canyon where the grass grew too sparsely to burn.

The time it took the Chico gang to get their animals under control and in the notion of going back over the smoking, hot floor of the canyon was long enough. For just as the six-man gang made a third attempt to ride out of the trap, Ike Johnson and a dozen armed settlers burst into view. The singed and fire-blackened outlaws had had enough. They threw down their guns and surrendered.

It was dark when Doc, MacLoyd, and Ike Johnson and his men herded the outlaws along the one street of Dry Bluffs toward the jail. Deputy Ham Brady and his posse had already returned empty handed, except for one lone prisoner. She was the girl who pretended to be Theo Hempsweet. "Found her at the pass," Ham said around a huge cud of finecut. "Acted like she was runnin' away, so we brought her back."

Max Chico, crooked-nosed leader of the gang, glared at the girl. "Yuh double-crossin' little hyena!" he snarled. "Why I ever trusted you, I'll never know!"

"I didn't double-cross nobody!" the girl snarled back.

Doc smiled happily to himself. MacLoyd turned slightly pale.

After the prisoners were locked up, and things had quieted down, Doc waddled into the sheriff's two-by-four office. MacLoyd, he saw, had on his old clothes, and his hair looked as if it hadn't been combed for a month. The mirror behind the desk had disappeared, and the battered brass spittoon stood in the middle of the floor.

MacLoyd's thin lips puckered and sent a hissing stream of tobacco juice through the air. It hit the spittoon dead center, almost upsetting it. "Well, what do yuh want, yuh ole goat?" he growled.

Doc felt a happy warmth steal through him. The dreamy look was gone from the sheriff's bony face. "Reckon we might do some swappin'," Doc murmured. "Got a ole razor I might trade fer that watch."

"A razor?" MacLoyd's voice was filled with scorn. "I ain't got no need fer a razor. Wouldn't swap this watch fer a dozen razors, even if yuh'd throw in your mangy team of bay hosses to boot."

Doc bristled. He felt the insult in MacLoyd's words, for he thought a heap of those sleek, fat bays. Anger began to build up in him, but under the anger was a great contentment. Now, he knew, life would once again be worth while, for MacLoyd was again his old self.

"Lis'en, yuh turtle-headed ole coyote," Doc roared, "I wouldn't swap them bays fer—" A cagey look came into his eyes. "Mebbe yuh'd swap fer that razor if I told yuh how come them outlaws rid into Dead End Canyon instead of escapin' through Sugar Creek Pass?"

MacLoyd had a bump of curiosity as big as a haystack, and Doc knew it.

"Mebbe so," the sheriff said cautiously. "Mebbe not."

"That girl," Doc told him, "had yuh takin' her all over Bluff County so's she could make a map fer these owl-hooters, so's they'd be able to follow the short-cut to the pass. I got hold of her map, erased the red line she made to show 'em the trail and made another red line that led 'em into the canyon."

MacLoyd swallowed hard. Solemnly he drew the watch from his pocket.

"It's a swap, and yuh can keep yore razor fer boot," he said. His voice turned harsh. "But if yuh ever put a corn knife against my neck again, I'm goin' to bust yore head."

Doc didn't wait to hear anymore. Whistling happily, he waddled through the door and headed toward his neat cottage with the new coat of white paint. He felt mighty good. In fact, he felt so good that if he'd met a rattlesnake, he'd likely let the sidewinder keep his rattles.

Jonas kicked his peg leg straight out and caught the impact of Micah's body

RIVER MAN'S GAMBLE

By HAROLD R. STOAKES

When fur boss Micah Rugg tries his strong-arm tactics once too often, Captain Jonas Aronson must fight terrific odds!

YOU, JONAS ARONSON! I'll not have a man turn his back when he has eyes to see that I'm seeking him out!"

Micah Rugg's bawling voice rolled along the palisade walls of the outpost and became lost in the thickets that edged the muddy-flowing waters of the Missouri River.

Captain Jonas Aronson of the stern-wheel river boat, the *Lady Lucinda*, continued stolidly through the fur fort gates and down the slope toward the river. His steps were unhurried but as he walked he swung his peg leg in a small jerking arc. The whittled shavings from the stick in his hand fell like smooth slabs of soap away from the razored edge of his pocket knife.

He didn't turn until Micah's hand clutched at his shoulder, whirling him about.

Jonas held the humped-bladed knife at his thigh, but there was a flexed firmness to his grip.

He saw Micah back away.

"I've questions to ask—and straight answers wanted for them," Micah said heavily.

Jonas smiled dourly. Micah Rugg had had to hurry, and it had taken a toll of his breath and his dignity. As *bourgeois* of the fur fort and master of the men who clustered around it, Micah was accustomed to having his calls obeyed. Up the slope buckskin clad *engages* milled about the gates, solid-eyed and expectant.

Jonas looked back at Rugg. Colored porcupine quills were worked into the buffalo hide smoothness of Micah's wampus, emphasizing the wide set of his shoulders. His nose had been slashed away in a downriver brawl so that there was a scar-welted, pig-flat ugliness to his face. His eyes were the gray-green of river slime with bloodshot streaks like stabs of sunlight watering their depths.

Micah's legs were short-stemmed and bowed as though ever ready to squeeze down on an Indian cayuse or to crush the ribs of a man's body.

Jonas looked at his eyes again. "What kind of questions are you asking, Micah?" he said calmly.

"I want to know why you've tied up at the landing," Micah Rugg grated.

Jonas looked on down the slope where the *Lady Lucinda* swayed softly at her hawsers. She was a slim craft with twin stacks midway toward the bow, iron-hard hickory built into her paddle wheels, a seven inch draw off her keel—and a $10,000 debt waiting the moment she touched the Yankton levee.

"I'm tied up for fuel," Jonas said. "I'll be moving downriver in the morning."

"You ain't waiting for Christian Abel and his mountain trappers? You ain't fixin' to trade for their furs?"

The words were half questioning, half threatening, and rolled thickly from Micah's tongue. Jonas shook his head.

"I've no plans for it."

"Same time you ain't going downriver with an empty boat, mebbe." Micah's eyes squinted suspiciously. "You went upstream with government military supplies. A river boat don't pay expenses unless there's a two-way freight. Furs fill a sternwheeler's hold."

"I'm not a fur trader," Jonas said simply.

"Last year you traded for Christian Abel's furs," Micah said. "Remember, Jonas? You paid twelve dollars for prime beaver while I was offering six." Micah's lips parted, showing his teeth. "Only your furs never reached Yankton, Jonas. Your boat was burned somewhere down the river."

Jonas stiffened. There was a sweat line matted into his sideburns by the rim of his captain's cap. His face was pointed, with a plank slab hardness to his cheeks, and a deep-socketed intenseness to his eyes.

"I guess you would know more than most men about where and how she was sunk," he said to the fort boss. He measured Micah with a biting hatred in his eyes. "I've no money for trading and no plans for it."

"Make sure you don't." Micah's gaze roamed down the whittled smoothness of the captain's wooden leg. "I wouldn't want to see a man have his other leg cut out from under him." He laughed coarsely. "A one-legged man's only half a man. A no-legged man wouldn't be more than a stump."

THE COLOR drained slowly from Jonas's temples, the whiteness running down over the plank smoothness of his cheeks like paint. Anger flamed deep in his eyes, but as he leaped forward he was conscious of the slipping of his wooden leg against the clay trail.

Micah Rugg shifted under the flash of Jonas's blade. His moccasined toe caught against the wooden leg, jerking it sideways. For moments Jonas hopped vainly to recover his balance. Micah's fist slammed against his chin, toppling him back.

As he fell, Jonas jacked his knees to his chin, making a ball of his body so that he rolled down the slope before Micah could leap on his back. At the bottom he twisted about, the knife still firm in his hand.

He was on his knees as Micah charged down the bank.

Jonas was barely on his feet when Micah reached the bottom of the slope. Shifting all of his weight to his good leg, he kicked his peg leg straight out so that it formed a spear in front of him.

He felt the hurtled impact of Micah's body against it. Pain scudded across Micah's eyes. Then Jonas staggered back, seeking again to regain his footing until he fell at the water's edge.

When the captain raised to his knees, Micah Rugg lay doubled, with a snarling, pained rage twisting his lips. *Engages* swarmed down the slope. Standing, Jonas looked down at the peg leg. The jolt of Micah's body against it had numbed the stump of his leg.

"It is a weapon that you gave me, Micah," he said softly.

As Jonas Aronson turned to the gangplank of the *Lady Lucinda* his gait was steady but his fingers trembled against the handle of the knife. He folded the large blade of it back with his thumb and thrust it into his pocket as he stumped aboard. In his cabin he slumped down heavily.

A year ago he had had two good legs under him when he bargained and bought Christian Abel's furs. His boat had been ambushed during the night. In the melee along the deck, Jonas' leg had been slashed to the bone by the rusty-bladed knives of the halfbreeds who swarmed over the bow.

Infection had set in and Jonas had amputated the leg himself, cutting the flesh below the knee, sawing the bone, and searing the blood vessels with a red-hot iron. When the stump had healed sufficiently, he whittled out the peg leg and strapped it into place.

It was the kind of memory that was scarred deep into a man's thinking. Jonas Aronson had gambled for freedom on the upper Missouri and lost. There had been some insurance money that had helped buy the *Lady Lucinda*, but the furs had never been recovered. Now he was crippled and there was a $10,000 debt against the new boat he had managed to secure.

Darkness came, squeezing down across the deck of the *Lady Lucinda*. Jonas hung a lantern to an overhead beam of the cabin and settled himself on a stool near the doorway. The worn length of the bone handle of his knife fitted his calloused hand with a long-accustomed familiarity.

There was the new leg that he was whittling, nearly done now, with the flaky grain of the quarter-sawed oak showing down its side.

Jonas whittled silently. He neither paused nor raised his head at the sound of horses breaking the thickets along the river. It would be Christian Abel and his trappers come to camp in the shadow of the fur fort—hoping for a good price for their pelts, knowing that if none came they would have to take Micah Rugg's offer.

The fires from shore made dancing shadows across the deck of the *Lady Lucinda*. An hour later when there was a soft shuffling of moccasined steps along the gangplank, Jonas knew that it would be Christian Abel come to call on him.

Abel stood momentarily in the doorway. He was a tall man, as cleanly firm as a willow wand, with the cords of his muscles like slim ropes under his skin. His antelope skin breeches were thonged at the knees, and flared down toward his moccasined feet with a bell-shaped roundness.

"I've no money to offer for furs," Jonas said directly, "and no plans for buying them."

"The offer I would make doesn't need money," Abel said.

Jonas looked at him, feeling a surge of bitterness. "Last year I bought your furs at a good price."

"You gambled for a profit and lost," the trader pointed out.

"I gambled for more than that." Jonas paused. "I thought free men could do business on the upper Missouri. I never held with a *bourgeois* who forced a slave's price on a trapper. I thought free men could stand together, but when Micah Rugg's halfbreeds lay across the bow of my boat, I stood alone."

"We didn't know that Micah would follow after you," Abel said.

"It might have been foreseen." Jonas closed his knife and shoved it into his pocket. "I've no ears for offers. I'm no longer a fur trader nor a fool."

Christian Abel's eyes were the chalky blue of a prairie sky. He frowned. "I heard that you trimmed your own leg, Jonas," he said softly. "I heard that you

seared the flesh with a poker held iron-hard in your hands. I heard that you had grit."

JONAS stood up and stumped across the cabin toward the river charts that lay on a straight-legged table. He smiled dourly. Stacked against the things a man could remember, words had little power to sting.

"I've grit enough to hear a man through, though it means little," Jonas said.

"We have furs—many furs. Mink, otter, beaver. Micah Rugg will offer six dollars for prime beaver." Christian Abel spoke slowly. "Down in the settlement a beaver's pelt will bring twenty, even thirty."

"Your furs are in the wilderness, not at the settlement," Jonas reminded him. "Get on with the offer you're making."

Christian Abel shifted, standing just inside the doorway, the reflected flare tongues from the trappers' fires licking along his legs.

"We will consign our furs to you," Abel said. "In the settlement you can sell them. You can deduct the cost of their freight and keep ten per cent of the sale price as an agent's commission."

Jonas looked at him wonderingly. "What makes you think I would return with your money?" he growled.

"We would trust you," Abel said simply.

Jonas hesitated. It was a tempting offer. Ten per cent of the free trappers' pelts plus the payment for a downriver shipment would cut a deep hole in the debt still owed on the *Lady Lucinda*. Still, Jonas knew that there was no good in the hope that it brought.

"You're still trying to break the hold that Micah Rugg has on you," he said.

Christian Abel shrugged. "We do what we can."

There was a stolidness in the man's words—a stolidness that angered Jonas Aronson. His gaze swept over the buckskin leanness of Christian Abel.

"Free trappers!" Jonas' tone was bitter. "You are no more free than the *engages* at Micah Rugg's fort. The *engage* signs for five years, to do Micah's bidding. At the end of his employment he carries a letter of credit downriver for his pay.

"Only the *engage* does not reach the settlement where his pay can be secured!" he said angrily. "Micah Rugg's halfbreeds ambush him in the thickets. *Engages* have learned not to leave Micah's employ. The free trappers will learn as much."

Christian Abel rubbed his hands against his thighs. "You do not like our offer?"

"Why don't you take the furs to the settlement yourself?"

"It is worth an agent's fee for us to be back on our trap lines in the hills," Abel said. "One man can keep a rendezvous to collect our money."

"What is to stop Micah from again destroying my boat?"

"This . . ." Christian Abel lowered his voice. "Down the river we have stout canoes, covered all around with tough hides. There is only a small opening like a hatchway to the top of them, and this, too, can be sealed. Your sternwheeler has a shallow draft. Filled with furs, the canoes can be lashed under the keel of your boat."

"When would this be done?"

"Tomorrow night when you anchor the *Lady Lucinda* down the river. If Micah Rugg should pursue your boat you can permit it to be searched. He will find nothing."

Jonas hesitated. It might work. Christian Abel was still gambling for his freedom on the river.

"You have many furs?" Jonas said slowly.

"You can see them for yourself."

Jonas followed silently down the swaying gangplank toward the fires of Christian Abel's men. It was a large camp notched down on the flat bank that curved away from the slope leading up to Micah Rugg's fort.

Nearly a hundred long-jawed mountain men moved through the night shadows. They were tall, most of them, with the grease from many campfires slickening the darkness of their buckskin clothing.

A buffalo had been butchered down on its belly, with its legs stretched out to support it, and the skin peeled away from its spine. Jonas watched as a long-fingered trapper wrapped *boudins* around a stick and crisped them over a fire.

The mountain men were relaxed now and easy, though their *epishemores* and powder horns, bullet pouches and long guns, were stacked in neat piles only a

hand's reach away.

Christian Abel threaded his way among them. Jonas stumped along in the tall trapper's wake.

"The furs are over here," Abel said.

Jonas looked them over carefully. They were prime furs and would bring a good price in the settlement. Beaver, buffalo, wolf—all neatly baled. Sixty beaver pelts made a 100-pound pack. There were otter, mink and fox, too.

A BOW-STEMMED shadow suddenly fell across the bales. Jonas looked up. Firelight emphasized the brutish scars of Micah Rugg's face. A dozen breeds formed a half circle around him.

"They are good furs, Abel," Rugg said harshly. "Bring them to the fort in the morning and we will bargain for them, but mind you bring only a few of your men."

Jonas glanced from one to the other. A tension sliced down across the camp. Christian Abel smiled grimly.

"We have no desire to trade like the Indians trade," Abel said. "We have no wish to herd into your trading room, with the guns of your halfbreeds trained on us through slits in the walls. You can make your offers now, Micah. What price are you offering for beaver?"

Micah Rugg's gray-green eyes slashed across Jonas' face. "Four dollars. Maybe five. The market has gone down."

"We are playing for better prices," Abel told him. "Fifteen, perhaps—or twenty. They will pay it in the settlement."

Rugg looked again at Jonas Aronson. "You have no way of getting them to the settlement," he said. Then he turned to the trader. "I would deal quickly, Abel. The price may go still lower."

Jonas watched as Micah Rugg shuffled back among the campfires. Micah's toe caught the neatly stacked trappings of one of the mountain men and scuffed them across the ground. The man growled, but hunkered back as Christian Abel spoke his name softly across the fire.

Jonas studied the trapper's face. There was a hardness in Abel's eyes.

"You will take our offer?" Abel asked.

Jonas looked again at the broadness of Micah Rugg's back. Anger was like a small rotting carcass, spilling its gaseous poison across his thoughts. He was, by the grace of Micah Rugg's fury, only half a man with little enough left to fight for on the upper Missouri. And yet—

"I will gamble again," Jonas said. . . .

Back in his cabin, Jonas lay fully clothed across his bunk. The peg leg was unstrapped and lay on the floor beside him.

It was a fool's course he was taking. Micah Rugg would suspect treachery if Christian Abel's furs disappeared. Even though a search of the *Lady Lucinda's* hold didn't reveal them, Micah might still smash his boat.

It was after midnight when Jonas heard a scuffling along the gangplank. As the door of his cabin opened, he reached down quietly for the peg leg and gripped it in his hand. The door closed, sealing in the darkness of the room.

Jonas could hear the breathing of his intruder. Moisture crept along his neck. The bunk slats groaned as he raised himself.

"If it's murder, let's have it out!" he grated across the darkness of the cabin.

There was a quick intake of breath. "*Non!* It is not murder. I am Georges Mollineux. *Engage* to Micah Rugg. I would talk with you."

"Stand where you are then."

Jonas sat up on the bunk and struck a flint to a candle. His visitor's face was young, but with harsh marks of wilderness years upon it. He was apparently unarmed.

"I have this." The *engage* came forward and thrust a paper into Jonas's hand.

Jonas examined it carefully. It was a letter of credit granted by Micah Rugg, but already it was mildewed in the creases. Jonas glanced at the date. It was more than a year old. He looked back at Georges Mollineux.

"I wish to go down the river. To cash the paper and to escape," the *engage* said simply. "You will hide me on your boat, no?"

Jonas refolded the paper and handed it back. Questions came to his lips, but he left them unsaid. It would be foolish to question the fear in the *engage's* eyes. Too many of them had been killed in the marshes along the river.

"Are there many who hold such papers at the fort?" Jonas asked.

"*Oui,* we are many."

"If there are many of you, you are strong."

"*Non!*" The *engage* shook his head vigorously. "Micah Rugg's halfbreeds carry long knives. They have spies among us."

Jonas frowned. It was slavery that Micah had brought to the upper Missouri. Yet there was little that a one-legged man could do.

"I can do nothing for you," Jonas said. "Micah Rugg will follow and search the *Lady Lucinda*. Your life would be worth less than mine if you were found aboard."

THE NEXT night, Jonas Aronson stood on the *Lady Lucinda's* deck, feeling the lapping of the Missouri's tugging current against the anchor ropes. He had anchored off a marshy point, with a swirl of deep water around the keel. In the sky, storm clouds wallowed around the moon, filling the night with darkness.

Jonas had seen Christian Abel's trappers break camp in the morning and ride away on their big-rumped plains horses, pulling *travois* of furs after them. He hadn't seen them during the day, but he knew that the course of the *Lady Lucinda* had been watched from the thickets that edged the bank.

A nervousness cramped his hands. In the darkness he whittled slowly at the peg leg he was making, feeling for the smoothness of the blade with his fingers. Suddenly he heard a whistle from the shore. A shadow raised up in the reeds of the marsh.

"We are coming aboard, Jonas Aronson."

There was no mistaking Christian Abel's voice. But while echoes of the words still lingered, Jonas heard Micah Rugg's bawling rage from somewhere close by.

"I will slice your noses, trappers, for your treachery!"

There was no time for Christian Abel's free trappers to come aboard. Covered by darkness, Micah Rugg had brought a muffled-oared flotilla down the river and anchored in mid-stream. Now Jonas saw the dark shapes of the canoes and pirogues as they swept toward the shore.

Pinned to the marsh, Christian Abel waited. The trappers were greatly outnumbered. Micah Rugg had commandeered both his halfbreeds and his *engages*.

A fusillade flamed across the river. Jonas heard the death scream of a halfbreed and saw a dark shape spill over the side of a pirogue. Then the flotilla drove aground. There would be little time for Christian Abel's mountain men to reload their long guns.

Cursing screams raked the shore as men fought with knives and the crushing stocks of guns. Jonas stumped hurriedly into his cabin, dropping the leg which he had been whittling at the doorway. There was a muzzle-loader inside with powder and lead already tamped into it.

As Jonas lurched back to the doorway, a little light spilled from the storm clouds overhead and he saw a rock-shouldered form claw its way over the stern railing. Wan moonlight burned across the scars of Micah Rugg's face.

Jonas raised the gun, firing hurriedly. Micah Rugg dropped to the deck, but he moved stolidly forward.

"You have winged me, Jonas," Micah said sibilantly. "I could kill you now . . . with my gun, Jonas . . . but there are better ways."

Micah was crouched as he crept forward. The skinning knife in his hand was like a saber.

"I will slice off your good leg to hear you scream," he whispered. "You will be only a stump when you die."

There was a choking shriek from shore. In the marsh men were dying in a last gamble for freedom on the river.

Jonas held the empty gun. It would be useless as a cudgel. It would twist him off balance when he swung, leaving him prey to Micah's knife. He hurled the gun across the deck, and saw Micah duck under it. Jonas slipped his own knife from his pocket.

"We will fight with knives, Micah," Jonas said. "I have learned much from whittling."

Standing stolidly on the deck, Jonas twisted about as Micah cautiously circled him. Micah was of no mind to come again within the spear range of the wooden leg. Instead, he would wait, feinting from the side, until Jonas stumbled off balance across the deck.

Jonas saw the arc of Micah's knife and swept upward with his own. Micah's

knife slashed the sleeve of his coat, burning a numb welt in his arm. Cautiously, Jonas retreated toward the door of his cabin. He couldn't fight like a slippery-footed deer, caught on the ice by wolves. He had need for protection to his back.

Again Micah charged, driving in from the side, his pig-flat face expressionless. Jonas lurched sideways and slammed the wooden stump of his leg against Micah's shin.

Micah bellowed as he stumbled back against the railing. Jonas shifted further along the wall until he stood in the doorway of the cabin where a hand grip would hold him if he lost balance. His foot kicked against the new leg he had been whittling before Micah Rugg's halfbreeds stormed the marsh.

Stooping swiftly, he seized it and swung it like a club. The oaken leg sailed across the deck. Micah dodged and it struck the railing and fell into the water. Triumph widened Micah's lips.

"A one-legged man is only half a man," the *bourgeois* snarled.

MICAH charged boldly. In the half darkness he thought that Jonas had thrown the leg he was wearing—and that he now stood with only a grip on the doorway to hold him up.

Jonas braced himself, waiting until Micah was close. Then he drove his wooden peg upwards. The point of it smashed high, crushing into Micah's ribs.

The strong-throated screams of the halfbreeds rolled along the marsh as Jonas swayed in the doorway. Micah doubled backwards, clutching himself as he fell. Pushing against the doorsill, Jonas leaped forward. The peg leg slashed down toward Micah's head, but the *bourgeois* rolled and the blow caught him full across the scarred nostrils.

Jonas swung heavily again, and heard the cracking of Micah's skull as the oaken peg crashed down. The man straightened spasmodically, then rolled slowly to his back—dead.

The blazing yammer of long guns still filled the marsh. Jonas stumbled uncertainly to the railing. Blood from his slashed arm stained the deck. Georges Mollineux had said there were many *engages* who had mildewed papers that Micah Rugg had given them—letters of credit that it would cost their lives to cash.

Jonas cupped his hands to his mouth.

"*Engages!*" he shouted. "Micah Rugg is dead. Now is the time to fight for your freedom."

There was momentary quiet along the river. In a pirogue Jonas saw the flashing of a knife. A halfbreed snarled. An *engage* had struck for his freedom.

A bullet whined across the railing. Jonas ducked back and secured the long gun from the deck, but even when it was loaded he held his fire. It was impossible to tell the shape of friend or enemy in the marsh. The fighting dwindled. When the flotilla headed back toward the *Lady Lucinda,* Jonas could see Christian Abel in the lead. The deck of the sternwheeler was washed with moonlight as the free trappers came aboard.

The *engages* had sided with the mountain men. Jonas saw Georges Mollineux clamber over the railing. He was free now to cash his mildewed paper down river.

"Some of Micah's halfbreeds escaped," Christian Abel said, "but they will cause no more trouble on the Missouri."

Jonas looked at him quietly. There were scratch marks along Abel's temple where a thumb had gouged toward his eye.

"You have gambled for freedom and finally won," Jonas said.

Christian Abel's lips were dourly grim. He shrugged.

"Gamble? There was no gamble. A fight perhaps. A man gambles with the things he is willing to give away. His shirt, perhaps, or his money. . . A man never gambles with his freedom. Sometimes he loses it, but he has to keep fighting until he gains it back."

Jonas looked across the river. There was truth in Abel's words, he slowly realized. Micah Rugg was dead. There would be no need for lashing a shipment of furs to a sternwheeler's keel. Freedom had come to the river. Even a one-legged man was a whole man when his spirit was free.

It was time for a man to stand and count his blessings. Jonas glanced down at his leg.

"I guess it was just horse luck that I lost that leg," he said. "I never was handy with knives. If I hadn't had that peg for fighting, Micah would have killed me for sure."

Carter's gun roared twice

WINNING IS A HABIT

By WILLIAM O'SULLIVAN

Dane Bellham discovers the best-laid plans of killers may go awry when they happen to strike a losing streak!

WHEN HE RODE into Settlement that morning, red-headed Dane Bellham looked as if he didn't have a thing on his mind but a hankering for a good time. He was grinning as wide as he could make it, and he hailed people whom he ordinarily wouldn't have given more than a nod. Everything was set for his winning.

Bellham had thought it all out earlier as he wolfed down a slab of ham and three eggs.

"Jed Carter needs killin'," he had said.

It was funny the way Dane Bellham had marked Carter for his enemy the first time Bellham laid eyes on him. It was one of those things that make you believe in fate, in things ordained.

Jed Carter, he remembered, had come into "Doggy" Noel's Frontier Saloon just fresh off the stagecoach, a figured carpetbag in his left hand and a five-gallon hat in the other.

Carter had stood there a minute, looking around him with dark eyes that could grin and be serious at the same time. Then he'd crossed over to the bar to order a slug of whisky.

"Make it a double," he said to the bartender. "A man got killed holding up the coach. Or trying to. It sorta unnerved me."

Dane Bellham remembered the patronizing smile he had given the newcomer while walking out to get the details of the holdup from Pete Simkin, the stagecoach driver.

"It was Baldy," the stageman said, his eyes going around the circle of faces. "Baldy Hope hisself. I left him right there, plugged 'tween the eyes. Yup, Baldy Hope. Well, we're rid of that murderin' cuss."

"You scared the pilgrim clean outa his wits," Dan Bellham drawled. "He's in there now, propping up his innards. A right purty boy he is, too."

There was a laugh at that. Dane Bellham was regarded as a wit around Settlement, Wyoming. Once that happens, all you have to do to keep them laughing is to keep saying things. Being witty is a habit, Dane Bellham figured.

Everybody laughed but Pete Simkin. Simkin just stared at Bellham for a moment, then chewed down twice on his tobacco before he spoke.

"It was the pilgrim that plugged Baldy," Simkin said. "No fuss, no feathers. Just upped his gun and let Baldy have two. Bang, bang. Don't you worry yoreself none 'bout the pilgrim, Dane. Fer a lawyer he is right handy with his weapons. By dad, I'm gonna pay fer that drink. He's shore helped Settlement out a lot. And him not even located in town a good five minutes."

SIMKIN went inside and most of the men followed him.

Sophie Dyer, the judge's daughter, didn't follow, of course. The Frontier Saloon was no place for women. Not women like golden, lovely, young Sophie Dyer.

Sophie didn't follow inside, but the way she was looking, with lips parted and eyes bright and her cheeks colored with excitement, she looked as if she'd have liked to.

"Lucky shooting," Dane Bellham drawled as he followed along. But he was thinking— "Unlucky for me, though. Baldy paid right good to hide over in my range shack. Half what he got."

Inside the barroom, Bellham took up a position where he could watch the newcomer. The young lawyer's eyes moved slowly in an arc. Dane Bellham knew the darkly handsome man would some day be his enemy, for those eyes of his came to rest in a steady meeting with Bellham's blue ones.

It was like that. No hackles rising, no attempt to stare the other down, no truculence that any observer could see. But Bellham knew it was the same with Jed Carter as it was with himself. They both knew. They both accepted.

This man is my enemy.

There was nothing of threat in young Jed Carter's activities, so far as Bellham was concerned. Not at first.

The lawyer took a room with Widow Cahill, rented office space over the laundry, and seemed to go quietly about his business. But that business led Carter to handle Hackett's complaint that Dane Bellham had usurped Hackett's waterhole for stock.

Dane Bellham lost the case.

Not that it mattered, really. Bellham was a logical man. When he took over the waterhole and fenced it, he had known that Bill Hackett had only three courses open to him.

Hackett would do nothing about it, which would have been all right with Bellham. Or Hackett would try to shoot it out with him, which also would have been all right with Bellham. Or Hackett would go to law, as he did. That was all right with Bellham, too, because Bellham had had the use of Hackett's water pending the suit, and Bellham had fattened his cattle while Hackett was losing his in the drought.

It was true that Jed Carter ceased to smile when he greeted Bellham. In fact, Carter stopped greeting him. But that could have been over the fact that Dane Bellham had the inside road with Sophie Dyer.

Then, when Hackett had to own up that he was broke, Bellham waited around to buy at his own price. He was still waiting and was prepared to wait longer.

Jed Carter bought out Hackett, first thing Bellham knew. For the first time, too, Dane Bellham knew what it was to be laughed at instead of leading the laughter.

Bellham didn't like that. But he waited smugly to see Carter's face when Carter found out that even with the waterhole he was going to lose cattle. There just wasn't enough water to support enough cattle to make the place pay.

Bellham started the kidding when Carter hired the Lane boys and their father to dig a well. Everybody knew that there was water thirty-five feet down. And everybody knew that the well would go dry come the next drought.

But Carter, who was paying the usual by-the-foot price to the Lanes, shook his head when the old man and the boys hit water at thirty-five feet. They came on up from the well.

"Keep digging," Carter ordered. "I'm paying by the dug foot. I'll keep on paying. Dig deeper. It's just coming out of the well sides where you are now."

At forty-nine feet deep the water started again. And again the Lanes came up.

"Keep digging," Carter said, grinning. "I'll pay."

At seventy-nine feet the Lanes came up and stayed up. The water was coming in the bottom and flooding up past the higher inflows.

That summer, when Dane Bellham and all the others went dry and cattle were dying, Jed Carter's well continued to flow and Jed Carter's cattle continued to prosper.

"The man's a winner," the townsmen proclaimed. "Even with that reformed drunk, Happy Jack, pokin' around like he was a worker, an' all the help that Carter has, he's makin' it pay. The man is a natural-born winner."

They said it again when Judge Dyer smilingly told some news to his old friends about Settlement.

"I always wanted a son, though I don't rue Sophie, she is such a good girl. But now I'm gettin' a son, too. Jed Carter is going to marry my daughter."

DANE BELLHAM was philosophical about that, too. As much as he could be. It gave him pleasure to think that Carter and all the others knew he could have had Sophie Dyer to wife him. It was just because Dane had seen fit to act in his own good time that Carter got her. That and the fact that Carter was a winner, as they were all saying again.

"Winning is a habit," Dane Bellham thought as he reined in at the hitching rail in front of Casey's Restaurant. "The trouble with a winner is that he gets so used to winning that he gets careless. And Jed Carter is just a little too used to winning."

What helped make up Bellham's mind was that he had sold the upland strip to Carter at what he thought was a merciless price. The upland strip had a good stand of prime oak on it and also some old hickory in quantity.

It also had Bellham's old range shack on it. Since the last drought, Dane Bellham had sort of lost interest in cattle raising. In fact, there were those who said Dane Bellham had lost interest in most everything since Sophie Dyer had been promised to Jed Carter.

Even when Bellham forced his attentions on Sophie at her home while Jed Carter was away on a circuit-riding trip, and Judge Dyer ordered Bellham to stay away, Carter didn't act angry.

"Never you mind the judge," Carter laughingly told Bellham. "You come around to call whenever you have a mind to, Dane. I don't mind and Sophie doesn't, either."

That had hurt. It had happened in Casey's when Bellham was telling some listeners of the judge's temper. But he left out the part where Sophie had said Jed Carter felt sorry for Dane Bellham.

If Carter had raged or even looked angry, it would have been some sop to Dane Bellham's vanity. But a laughing invitation to come around whenever he had a mind, as if he didn't count, as if he wasn't a man to be feared with the ladies, that had hurt.

Dane Bellham made up his mind that Jed Carter had to die when Carter uncovered evidence that Baldy Hope, the road-agent, had been using Bellham's upland shack as a hideout with Bellham's knowledge.

Bellham had been supposed to be living in the shack at the time of a Wells Fargo holdup. That was how he had shunted away the search for Baldy when it came that way.

Carter found Wells Fargo money bags and a hideaway under the floor, with a cunningly contrived trap door.

All Jed Carter had to do was determine when that old Wells Fargo robbery had taken place. His investigator's nose would ferret out the rest of it—the date Dane Bellham had moved to the shack, the date a searching party had come that way, the date Bellham had moved out of the range shack, which was the day after Baldy was killed.

The thing that hurt most in the damning evidence was that Baldy, who had been a voracious eater and rarely satisfied with the meals Bellham had prepared for him, had been filching tins when Bellham wasn't around. He had left the empty containers under the floor as a clincher.

Dane Bellham had bullied "Dudy" Meeks into selling him a whole consignment of beans. Everybody would remember that. That particular consignment had been different from the brands before it or since. All circumstantial, but all very indicative, if Jed Carter ever cared to link it to the period when Dane Bellham had "got some money from home."

In a cool, collected court, it might not have held. But in frontier Wyoming, Bellham had seen men strung up with far less evidence pointing an accusing finger.

So Jed Carter had to die. Jed Carter had to lose once. The loss would be a big winning for Dane Bellham. His only winning since Carter had come to Settlement. But Bellham's most important one.

Carter was going to die tonight. Bellham was merely making a check of everything to be sure that he wasn't slipping up any place.

"Let Carter slip up," Bellham thought. "That is the way it will look, anyway. Careless from winning too often, it will appear."

Bellham regretted in a way that it wouldn't bring Sophie back to him. He knew she would never come. So Bellham would never get over the injury she had inflicted on his pride in accepting Carter. Wanting not to be hurt, he had forced himself unbidden into her home in Carter's absence. That had back-fired.

HE WALKED into Casey's Restaurant and braved a cup of dreg-laden coffee to start laying the groundwork for his winning. "Seen Carter?" he asked as he set his cup down. "No? I heard he wanted to see me. Something came up on the upland section, I calculate."

He very well knew something had come up on the upland section. That's where Carter was at that moment and would be all day. The railroad that everybody talked about and nobody really thought was coming, was all but a reality.

Right now some railroad men were cruising Bellham's old timber stand with Carter, offering fancy prices for heart oak and hickory.

Casey frowned after Bellham's broad back, muttering, "So! Jed Carter is after Dane, is he? Well, I'd best keep back from me windows until this meeting is history."

In the Frontier Saloon, where Bellham had first seen Carter the morning after the pilgrim lawyer shot Baldy Hope, Bellham asked the same question. But only after he had casually checked a bullet hole in the windowsill. The bullet hole that would be evidence of where Carter's shot would miss just before Bellham would plug him.

It would all be very legal-looking. Jed Carter would fire first. Dane Bellham would see to that. And to the rest of it.

He seemed to be looking out into the street, but actually he was marking where he had carefully fired that slug when some cowpokes were celebrating the other night at closing time and had started trouble.

Harry and Doggy Noel had then been counting receipts and the door had been locked when the cowboys got into an argument and threatened to shoot up the place. Dane Bellham had drawn his six-gun and calmly blasted two shots across the table carefully between the men.

He had intended firing both slugs into the deserted street, but one of his leaden missiles had struck the windowsill.

At the time, it didn't mean a thing. But it became very important later in Bellham's plan.

At the time, the cowboys had thrown

their hands skyward, crying surrender in frightened voices. Harry and Doggy Noel laughed as they watched Bellham open the door and throw the cowboys out.

"Thanks, Dane; you're a card," Doggy Noel had said. "Any damage done?"

"No," Bellham said, for he didn't want someone saying, "Why, you couldn't even shoot out a window from five feet away."

Because Dane Bellham had a mind that worked like that—slickly and covering up all the time—he noted that the gray windowsill was about the color of Noel's soap in the washroom.

He went to the washroom, filched a piece, and came back to the hole. He caulked in the soap until the buried slug was covered over and the scar in the wood didn't show. When he was turning away he noticed the sill was right opposite where Jed Carter sat every Wednesday night in the poker game.

Because Bellham's mind worked like that, he sank into a chair and let the thing come to him. In detail. And all the details worked out as if they had been written that way since the beginning of time. Just as if fate had ordained it all to go that way.

It went about like this, the working of Bellham's brain—"If only Carter had just made that hole, shooting at me and missing me. And then he was slumping back in his chair, my bullet between his eyes. Just like he got Baldy that day. Between the eyes."

He didn't know if Jed Carter would ever say anything about finding Baldy's hideout. Carter had told Bellham about it. But Bellham couldn't make up his mind if Carter were warning him before he spoke, giving him a chance to explain or just mentioning it as a bit of curious fact.

Foolishly, Bellham had said, "Huh? His hideout, yuh say? Well now, I haven't been around that range shack in a long, long time."

Of course, that would be the first thing everybody would hit on—that Dane Bellham had been around it and had turned the searching posse away.

Bellham waited for someone else to speak about it. When no one did, he was even more disturbed than ever.

He had come to view Carter's silence as the act of a cat playing with a mouse. Bellham was the mouse. He couldn't go away for fear Jed Carter might mention Baldy's hiding place.

"Oh, Jed's gone? Say, that reminds me of something—"

There was nothing to keep Bellham in Settlement but Carter.

FOR two years before he was shot, Baldy Hope had been Bellham's main profit. The cattle failure of a year ago had discouraged Bellham from re-stocking. He had to sell the upland part, and it turned out that the section would have made good money. Bellham's wells also had gone dry because he hadn't shored them up properly. The walls had fallen in.

So he couldn't stay in Settlement and he couldn't leave. Not with Jed Carter alive.

The plot to kill Carter and remain in the clear worked itself out smoothly as Bellham studied the slug his gun had buried in the saloon windowsill, which was opposite the chair that Jed Carter occupied every Wednesday night in the poker game.

All that had to be worked out now was to get Carter to draw and fire. Without hitting Bellham, of course. Then Bellham's return fire would be legal, and Carter's death would be legal. And Bellham's continued existence here or anywhere else would be safe.

Like any careful man of the area, Carter always wore his gun. Like Bellham's own, it was a six-gun with a black walnut grip. Bellham had noticed that Carter took his gun-belt off for the poker game and hung it over the back of his chair.

"This here is a friendly game," Carter would laugh as he removed his belt and holster before he sat down.

Bellham, an avid watcher, but without the money to play any more, had tested an idea for the last two Wednesday nights. The trick was just about fool-proof.

Bellham had come in and was standing close to Carter to watch the game. Carter had winning ways at poker. It was a habit.

Bellham had stolen Carter's gun, taken it to the washroom, fitted a blank into the chamber next to receive the blow of the firing pin, and then he had replaced the gun in the holster. Without anyone seeing it! That's how intent on their poker the

men of Settlement were.

Jed Carter had a reputation for being careless about his gun, though it was said he was a crack shot, which his work on Baldy Hope had indicated.

Dane Bellham had opportunity to confirm that carelessness when he dropped into Carter's office on the pretext of telling this-and-that about the upland property. He was able to steal Carter's gun again and to see if the blank were still where he had placed it.

Just this morning he had dropped in on Carter again, got to the gun where it hung on the hatrack, and he had seen the blank in the usual place to receive the firing pin.

"There's only one gamble," Bellham saw it. "That Jed don't do any shooting to use up the blank. But I can check that." He grinned. "First!"

The working of it would be simple. Jed Carter was a sharp card player. He watched everything. Several times when there had been a questionable deal in the game, Carter had been the one to protest. The lawyer was always ready, Bellham had seen, for the other's draw. But there hadn't been any going for guns. Carter had that much of a reputation for his sharpness and his gunning ability.

"I will fake a hidden-card move, one that will show up later as being strictly honest," Bellham told himself. "When Jed calls me and goes for his gun as I grab for mine, he'll get the first shot at me. But it will be blank. I'll see to that. No one else will know it, for I'll have the soaped-up hole to point to.

"All I have to do is be shore he still has the blank there. I'll check it first, then get in the game. Then I'll work it for Jed to go for his gun an' shoot. After I make shore the blank is readied. I'll let him crash one at me, an' then it'll be all over, Jed Carter's winning streak."

So now Bellham eyed the hole his slug had made in the windowsill. Casually he dug the soap out with his index nail and saw that the slug was still there. Harry Noel wouldn't clean up until after the game, so the hole would be there, and nobody would know that it wasn't Carter's slug that had made it. Nobody would ever know that the reason Dane Bellham killed Carter was that Carter's gun was fixed with a blank.

BELLHAM walked back to the bar and engaged Harry Noel in conversation. Then Bellham said, "Say, I wonder why it is Jed Carter is riled up at me? A couple of men told me he was askin' for me. You know? You don't? Like as not it is somethin' he wants to know about the upland piece."

Noel looked thoughtfuly after Bellham when he went away.

At Johnson's Livery Bellham asked the same question. At Golding's freight yards. Everywhere the answer was the same. Everywhere people watched the hard-eyed, grim-faced man when he went away.

The poker game was in full swing when Bellham let himself into the Frontier by the back door.

"Hitching rails are crowded up with cayuses," he explained to Harry Noel. "I tied my bronc out back."

When he had had two drinks—the extra one was while he mentally checked everything—he walked over to the poker table, coming up behind Jed Carter.

Bellham saw with satisfaction that there was nobody sitting in front of the window. He could see the faint black hole that he alone knew was the slug-mark that would cover up the fact that Carter had a blank in his gun cylinder ready for the firing pin.

Jed Carter was working up a big pot, smiling quietly and joshing, and taking the joshing that was given back.

"Calling my bluff, huh?" Carter was saying. "I drew one, and you know it is a four-flush, I reckon?" Actually, Carter's hand held four queens. "Well, I reckon I'll just have to bluff you down."

Bellham stole the gun on the back of the chair at that moment, working with his chest and a hand hidden by Carter's discarded coat, which was spread under the gun-belt. He got the weapon into his shirt, got the shirt button secured again, then got up with a yawn, and loafed back to the washroom.

Inside, he worked fast. He checked the gun, grinned when he saw the blank still where he had put it. He ducked the gun into his shirt, then lazed out and back to the game. He sank down behind Carter's chair again and palmed the gun back into the holster where it hung between Carter and the wall. Then he started his act.

"Mind if I cut in for a bit?" he asked.

Even if they didn't like him, they knew better than to show it openly.

"I feel lucky, Jed," he said, sitting down. "What you win on them four ladies?"

"Four? Heck man, I wish it had been. It was only three, an' I was bluffin'. I could get away with it back in Kentucky, but Goodlow beat me with a small straight he went in with pat."

But Bellham knew Carter had really had four queens. Goodlow was a pensioner from the War Between the States. He risked his disability check each month. He used to lose a lot until Jed Carter started playing. Strangely, Carter could beat everybody but old Goodlow.

Bellham played a couple of hands, palming his discards as if he were absent-minded. Once he dropped his cards on the floor. Another time he dealt himself one too many, and he dropped out when Carter noticed it.

Then he palmed a card, scratched his head, and let Carter, whose eyes instantly shot over him, see him apparently taking a card from his hat. Carter's eyes stood still on him, then the lawyer was laughing. He got his gun-belt, strapped it on.

"What am I supposed to do now, Bellham?" Carter asked. "Go for my gun and shoot you? Is that why you keep putting that blank in there?"

Bellham gasped, then sat straight, shaking his head. He couldn't be hearing right.

"W-what?" he asked stupidly.

IN THE stillness that had come over the room, Jed Carter said clearly and gently, "You have been sneaking my gun out of my holster and priming a blank for the firing pin, Dane. I asked you why? Am I supposed to think you're cheatin' now, an' accuse you? Is that it? An' then do you make a move at your gun, an' I flush mine. When I fire, it's a blank, an' the blank lets you live whilst you kill me? Is that it?"

Bellham could only stare at Jed, then at the circle of unfriendly faces that were turned on him like so many little blobs of moons. But Bellham's mind worked like lightning.

"Somehow, he's wise," he thought. "But it's my only chance, anyway. Besides, that blank is there in the same place like always. I just now saw it, an' he hasn't moved to touch the gun. And the window-sill hole will back me up in any question that comes later. If I can only get him to draw!"

Then he was laughing softly when Carter spoke again, for it was all set.

"Just keep your hands real quiet," Carter said. "If you make one little move for your gun. I'm comin' out shootin'. I been staying real quiet, Dane, givin' you a chance to leave town. Instead, you have been workin' up something against me. You know it an' I know it. An' we both know why." His dark eyes contracted. "Keep clear of your gun!"

Bellham went for his gun. He had it out and coming up even as Jed Carter spoke. Because Bellham had it planned that way, and because he wanted everybody to say later that Carter had fired first, he was glad the lawyer was so lightning-fast now.

The other players were throwing themselves aside when a gun roared twice in succession. Jed Carter's gun. Dane Bellham felt himself slammed out of the chair. A giant kick paralyzed his left side.

He lay on his back on the floor, his gun still in his nerveless grasp, and he heard voices above him.

"He's dead!" old Goodlow declared. "His eyes is open, but sightless. That warn't two blanks, Jed. Yuh shore shot fast."

In the marble-still awareness that precedes death, Dane Bellham realized that somehow the habit of winning didn't make a man careless. Maybe the habit of losing and the excitement of going-to-win made a man forgetful, as it had him, Bellham.

A sneer of contempt for his own stupidity twisted Bellham's lips in readiness for his eternal death mask when he heard Jed Carter's voice coming from far away.

"I have been watching Dane Bellham pretty close. Three times I found there was a blank ready to take my firing pin after he'd been around. I simply triggered twice. The first time the firing pin hit a blank cartridge. When I triggered again, a loaded shell came into position. That one went off."

Dane Bellham wasn't listening because he was beyond listening. His entire dying faculties were concentrated on trying to figure if they wouldn't make allowances for a fool, where he was going, or if winning was a habit there, too.

Long Sam's blow almost unhorsed Brute

LONG SAM'S JINX

By LEE BOND

Things look black for Littlejohn when a scheming marshal and a trio of Border jumpers land him in the calaboose!

THE big roan horse ran in staggering strides. Foam was making a white border around the square skirts of the saddle on its straining back. Astride the ugly, ewe-necked old roan sat a gaunt, unusually tall man who was dressed in jetty black from boots to flat-crowned Stetson. The man looked grim as death as he studied the towering green walls of tornillo, mesquite and prickly pear that fanned out below the slope down which the ugly roan horse was pounding.

"We'll make it, Sleeper!" the tall man said. "It ain't far to the Rio now, fella, and we'll sure split that river wide open. Joe Fry won't follow us to Mexico, for that badge of his don't mean a thing, over there."

The man looked back as he finished speaking, an angry frown making hard lumps of thin brows that were as yellow as his heavy hair.

A stocky rider had just appeared at the crest of the slope behind him, spurring

a tall bay that was about run out.

The tall, black-clad man swore sharply, facing quickly around when the roan horse he had called Sleeper broke stride. They were in the edge of the thickets now, and the roan's crimpy ears cocked forward as it tried to stop. The tall rider spurred his mount on, but the roan skidded to a full stop just around the first turn in the crooked lane. A big, handsome fellow mounted on a magnificent white Arabian stallion sat there, grinning coldly down the barrel of a leveled six-shooter.

"Well, well!" the man on the Arabian sneered. "Long Sam Littlejohn, slickest noose-dodger in Texas. Considerin' the amount of cash money offered for yore outlawed hide, I could make a nice piece of change by lettin' this gun go off, Sam."

"Mose Kimbaugh, Satan's gift to the Texas smugglers!" Long Sam Littlejohn snorted. "That would be Luther Wright and Chip Brule shufflin' around behind that clump of pear yonder, I reckon. For a pair of professional bushwhackers, they make a lot of noise, don't they?"

Mose Kimbaugh quit grinning, his ruggedly handsome face turning slowly red. Hard black eyes glittered angrily down the barrel of the gun he gripped a little tighter.

"Don't get lippy with me, Littlejohn!" he snapped. "I've heard tales about yuh that make me want to shoot yuh first and talk to yuh later."

"What kind of tales you heard?" Long Sam asked drily.

"The story has got around that yuh spend a lot more time huntin' down other outlaws than yuh do dodgin' the law that has put a bounty on yore tough hide!" Kimbaugh said harshly.

"Speakin' of the law reminds me that there's a derby-wearin', cigar-chewin' little hellion no more than a couple of jumps behind me, right now," Long Sam droned. "A stock thief and smuggler like you would likely know that feller, Kimbaugh. He's Joe Fry, deputy U. S. marshal, workin' out of Austin."

Voices muttered behind a tall clump of pear close by, then saddles squeaked as men mounted. A moment later two tough-looking fellows rode into the open beside Kimbaugh, glaring at Long Sam Littlejohn.

"Howdy, Wright," Long Sam greeted. "Howdy, Brule. When I heard somebody blunderin' around behind that clump of pear I figgered it would be you two, since neither of yuh ever gets very far from that struttin' thing."

Long Sam bobbed his head towards Mose Kimbaugh as he finished speaking. Kimbaugh cursed him, laid a thumb across the hammer of the Colt in his big fist, and jiggled the hammer in a threatening manner.

"Poke out to the edge of this brush and see if anybody is follerin' Littlejohn's sign, Luther," Kimbaugh ordered without taking his angry eyes off Long Sam.

Luther Wright nodded, laid his hand on the grips of a Colt holstered at his thigh. He was a slim, wiry man, with a pinched face and the pale eyes of a born killer. He rode off along the crooked lane, still holding his hand on the pistol butt.

"Joe Fry is plenty bad medicine," "Chip" Brule said slowly. "You sure he's hot on yore trail, Littlejohn?"

LONG SAM shrugged, but offered no verbal reply. He studied Chip Brule soberly, seeing nothing but unrelieved evil in the stocky man's slanted green eyes and thick-lipped, sullen countenance.

"What's the idea in bristlin' up at me this way, Kimbaugh?" Long Sam broke the stiff silence.

"I told yuh that I've heard yuh're workin' for the law!" Kimbaugh retorted.

"Yuh're lyin', Kimbaugh!" Long Sam said flatly. "Yuh know I'm not a scalp-hunter, workin' for the law or anybody else. I've swapped shots with a few buscaderos who got to wartin' me, sure. But they brought it on theirselfs, the way yuh're doin' by settin' there pointin' that gun at me."

"For a feller who is lookin' into the wrong end of a six-pistol, yuh're mighty careless about the way yuh talk, Littlejohn!" Chip Brule declared.

"I can waltz yuh to Rock Point and turn yuh over to Marshal Grat Cooper, Sam," Mose Kimbaugh said. "But if Cooper did lock yuh up, a certain friend of yores would maybe fetch a bunch of gun-hung cowhands of his and peel that jail off yuh, wouldn't he?"

Long Sam felt a jolt of sharp excitement run along his nerves. This was part of little old "Catfish" Bill Pelk's vast Ladder P

ranch, and Long Sam knew instantly what Mose Kimbaugh was hinting at. The brawling, outlaw-infested town of Rock Point was practically in the front yard of Catfish Bill's huge ranch house, yonder on the Rio Grande, several miles south.

Long Sam Littlejohn could ride in to Catfish Bill Pelk's Ladder P headquarters any time he felt like it, and find a friendly welcome. For Pelk's sake, he was careful about visiting the ranch, never allowing anyone except Catfish Bill or pretty little dusky-eyed Betty Pelk, Bill's daughter, to see him on the place. Yet Mose Kimbaugh had got wind of those visits somehow, and was apparently fishing for still more information.

"Yuh talk like yuh'd been eatin' some of the dope you and yore bunch smuggle across the Border, Kimbaugh!" Long Sam declared. "If I was to get locked in the Rock Point jail, I reckon no one would take the bother to get me out."

Kimbaugh swapped quick glances with Chip Brule. They looked so pleased Long Sam knew he had not fooled them at all.

"Get his guns, Chip," Kimbaugh grinned crookedly. "He thinks he lied to us about havin' no friends around Rock Point. But when he lands in jail and finds out who told Joe Fry where to locate him, he'll savvy that he was tellin' us the truth, even if he didn't aim to!"

Long Sam felt nervous chills play tag down his spine. That he was up against some sort of planned skulduggery he could not doubt. Nor could he doubt that Kimbaugh being here to get the drop on him was no part of mere coincidence.

"Watch him close, Mose!" Chip Brule warned. "I don't like the squinchy look that's come into his eyes."

BRULE was walking his horse forward, keenly alert. But he stopped suddenly, head snapping up when hoofs slapped the sandy ground close by. Long Sam glanced over his shoulder in time to see Luther Wright careen around a clump of tornillo, white eyes gleaming, an evil grin on his narrow face.

"Get set, amigos!" Wright shrilled. "Littlejohn wasn't lyin'. Joe Fry is out yonder, easin' up on these thickets mighty careful."

"Fry seen me hit this brush and is takin' his time about followin', knowin' I could be bushed up and ready to deal him grief," Long Sam mused drily.

"Get Littlejohn's guns, Chip!" Kimbaugh rapped out. "Then you and Luther get behind that stand of pear again. And try not to sound like yuh was havin' a wrestlin' match back there, this time."

"Bueno, Mose!" Chip Brule grinned. "We'll settle with Fry for nosin' around Rock Point the way he has the last two weeks, and we'll still have Littlejohn where the hair is short, too."

"Do you buzzards aim to kill Joe Fry?" Long Sam asked harshly.

"And yuh're the bait in our bear trap." Kimbaugh glared at him coldly. "Fry will come pokin' in here, and he'll rein to a dead stop when he finds me holdin' you at bay. Chip and Luther will be behind that pear clump, yonder. When Joe Fry stops, they'll cut him in two with slugs!"

Chip Brule crowded his horse forward, leaning out of the saddle to reach for one of Long Sam's famous black-butted six-shooters. And in leaning out and forward that way, Brule put his stocky body squarely between Long Sam and the muzzle of Mose Kimbaugh's leveled gun!

There was a hard grin on Long Sam Littlejohn's mouth when his right hand slid off the saddle horn, became a knotty fist that popped loudly against Chip Brule's thick lips and big teeth. The blow threw Brule backward, almost unhorsing him, wrenching a profane howl of pain and surprise from his throat.

Long Sam whipped a Colt from leather with his left hand, and the gun threw thunder through the thickets. He grunted in real disappointment when the slug only left a blood-spurting gash across Mose Kimbaugh's right cheek instead of hitting him between the eyes, as he had meant it to be.

Kimbaugh's stallion had fiddle-footed, causing Long Sam to score a near miss. But that gashed cheek seemed to warn Mose Kimbaugh that he was in considerable danger. He threw his gun away without firing it, flattened out over the saddle horn, and sent the fine Arabian roaring away from there.

Long Sam skinned the gun out of the holster at his right thigh, thumbing a fast shot at Luther Wright, who had rushed in for close-range work. Wright started squealing like a dog-caught pig when a

slug raked across his chest. He dropped his gun and lit out after Mose Kimbaugh, still yelling.

Long Sam's tall body pivoted at the waist, and the guns in his hands slanted their smoking snouts at Chip Brule, who had gathered his wits and jerked a six-shooter. Brule let his Colt drop without being told, cursing Long Sam through badly bruised lips.

"Split the breeze!" Long Sam snapped. "But I'll see you and yore two *companeros* again, Brule."

Brule needed no second invitation to leave, and as he went spurring away through the brush Long Sam realized that it was time he did a little riding, too. Hoofs were thudding out toward the edge of the thicket, and he knew that Joe Fry was coming on the run to investigate the shooting.

Guns holstered, Long Sam slammed spurs to Sleeper's sides, swinging the roan towards a tall stand of big mesquites. The gaunt outlaw meant to dodge behind that clump of brush, then rein in, let Joe Fry rush on past. Mose Kimbaugh and those other two cuttthroats were still making a lot of fuss riding through the thickets, and Fry would follow those sounds.

But Long Sam Littlejohn's luck was still sour. Sleeper had taken only the second jump when his right foreleg sank to the knee in a badger hole. Long Sam yelped in alarm, kicked his feet out of stirrups when he felt his horse falling. He saw that he was being catapulted into the very mesquites he had meant to hide behind, and was dreading the clawing those thorny branches were bound to give him when he swan-dived into the bushes. He butted a foot-thick mesquite bole, moaned once, then landed in a senseless heap on the sandy earth.

TEPID canteen water sloshing over his face and a gritty voice that swore at him peevishly, would not let Long Sam Littlejohn sleep. He opened his eyes, blinked them free of water, then closed his eyes again tightly.

"Quit actin' like yuh don't hear me and get up!" a gritty voice ordered. "If yuh keep stallin', Littlejohn, I'll pull a cactus pad and slap your ugly face with it, so help me."

Long Sam opened his eyes a little, looking up at Joe Fry, a stocky, thick-shouldered fellow who had a bulldog's jaw, a mouth tight as a sprung-steel trap, and chill gray eyes that mirrored the man's hardness. Fry had on a derby hat, a well-tailored gray suit, a soft shirt with a black tie at the collar, and button shoes. He looked a lot more like a successful drummer than the deadly, unyielding man-hunter he actually was, Long Sam decided.

"Yuh're nabbed, Sammy!" Fry said harshly. "Yuh're handcuffed, and this time yuh don't out-fox me and escape, as yuh've done a few times before."

"Shut up, Runt!" Long Sam groaned. "My head hurts bad enough, without you hollerin' in my ears. And back up, Joe. The skunk smell of yuh turns a man's stummick."

"Get up from there, and start tellin' me what that shootin' was all about!" Fry snapped. "I found three pistols, and the sign says three riders left here, fast. Blood on the sand, and guns that belonged to other men scattered around means yuh smoked somebody up, Sammy, and I want to hear about it."

Long Sam sat up, grunting a little as he fingered the painful lump atop his head. He brushed locks of yellow hair out of his smoky eyes, picked up his Stetson, and looked around for his horse.

Sleeper was standing a dozen paces away. The roan's ill-shaped head was down, and the horse breathed in whistling sounds.

"Is Sleeper done for, Joe?" Long Sam asked hoarsely.

"I don't know," Fry grunted. "I see where he stuck a foot in that badger den and took a fall. But I didn't examine him, because I ain't fool enough to ever get in reach of that rat-tailed fugitive from a glue works!"

Long Sam could understand Joe Fry's reluctance to approach Sleeper. The tough old roan was thoroughly bad tempered, and would kick, paw or bite any stranger who got within reach. Even Long Sam had to keep a wary eye on the roan, especially when saddling him.

Long Sam stood up, his legs shaking from something besides the shock of the fall he had taken. He walked to his horse, got hold of the bridle reins with both

manacled hands, and clucked sharply as he tried leading the roan. Sleeper rolled glittering eyes at Joe Fry, grunted like a shoat, and stepped forward.

"He's all right!" Long Sam cried. "He don't even limp, Joe."

"I can see that the critter is all right, but don't think I'm glad," Fry said, sourly. "That splay-footed thing is about the fastest, toughest hunk of horse than was ever foaled, even if he doesn't look it. I'd have nabbed yuh long ago, Sam, if that roan hadn't outrun every thing I've put after him."

Long Sam started to swing up into Sleeper's saddle, but Joe Fry told him to lead the roan and walk to where a tall blood bay stood over trailing reins. Not until he was up in the weary bay's saddle and had a carbine cradled across his lap would Joe Fry allow his prisoner to get aboard the tough old roan.

"I ain't tyin' yore big feet to the stirrups, and I don't aim to bother with leadin' yore hoss, Littlejohn," Fry said flattly. "But I will be right on yore hocks every second, and if yuh want to sleep on a marble slab instead of a cot at the Rock Point jail tonight, just act like you aimed to make a break."

Long Sam picked up Sleeper's reins and started the horse walking along the trail where he had swapped shots with Mose Kimbaugh and those other two Border toughs. He heard Joe Fry say something in a surprised mutter, and knew that he deputy marshal was wondering why he had not given him any kind of an argument.

"Quit sulkin' and start talkin', Littlejohn!" Joe Fry broke a long silence. "I want to know who yuh got into a scrap with back yonder where I found yuh."

Long Sam hipped over in the saddle, watching Joe Fry out of cold eyes as he explained how he had been taken unawares by Mose Kimbaugh, and what had followed.

"There are angles to that deal I sure don't savvy, Joe," the outlaw finished. "Kimbaugh meant to use me to bait his trap. You would have stopped when yuh rode up and found me bayed. And that would have been the last stop yuh ever made under yore own power, Joe, for Luther Wright and Chip Brule, hidden until they threatened to crack. He knew behind that pear clump, would have blown yuh to Kingdom Come."

"So yuh objected!" Fry scoffed. "You up and shot it out with three of the saltiest gunmen along the Rio, rather than see *me* get beefed, eh?"

"That's right," Long Sam drawled. "Kimbaugh and his pals wanted me in the Rock Point jail for some reason or other. My own hide was not in any danger, so all I had to do was be the bait that led you into that gun trap. But I wouldn't play Judas even to get rid of a nuisance like you, Runt."

"Quit tryin' to lie to me!" Fry snapped. "Yuh wouldn't lift a hand to save me or any other peace officer, so quit spinnin' tall tales and tell me what actually did happen back yonder."

But no amount of badgering from Joe Fry could get Long Sam to say anything else. They rode into the east end of Rock Point's one wide, dirty street just at sunset, Long Sam's smoky eyes busy studying the brush country on the Mexican side of the muddy Rio Grande.

"Them thickets on the yonder shore look mighty invitin', I'll bet!" Fry jibed, riding alongside of his prisoner for the first time.

"They look invitin'," Long Sam admitted, and brought his attention back to the rubbish-littered street.

Pigs rooted in the gutters, scores of dogs wandered aimlessly about, and grimy, half-clad children scurried for the questionable safety of miserable shacks. Rough-looking men slanted hard glances at Joe Fry and Long Sam as they jogged down the street.

LONG SAM lifted his eyes from the sorry sight of the town, looking at a tall white fence at the far end of the miserable street. The white fence circled a huge, white, Spanish-type house, the beautiful hacienda little old Catfish Bill Pelk had built long before there was a town here on the banks of the river.

"Here we are!" Joe Fry grunted. "Rein in to the tie rack, and no funny business, Long Boy."

Long Sam sighed, brought his attention back to the street. They were stopping before a narrow, flat-roofed building that had a row of tiny, barred windows showing along the east wall. In the building's

doorway stood a tall, thin man who wore a ball-pointed star on the front of his shirt, and watched them out of eyes that were as black and unwinking as the eyes of a snake.

"Sweep out your stoutest cell, Cooper!" Joe Fry grinned. "In case yuh're interested, this crane-legged thing I've fetched in is Long Sam Littlejohn."

"Do tell!" Marshal Grat Cooper drawled, and let his red slit of a mouth open in a well simulated yawn.

"Inside with yuh, prisoner!" Joe Fry snapped, whirling on Long Sam Littlejohn.

"Do tell!" Long Sam mocked, and Joe Fry looked as if he meant to hit him with the Winchester he held.

Marshal Grat Cooper backed lazily into the cluttered room he used as an office, Long Sam following him. Joe Fry was hard on Long Sam's heels, muttering darkly under his breath.

"The cells are back yonder, Fry," Cooper grunted. "There's the key ring, hangin' beside the door.

The marshal waved toward a door that led from his messy office into a narrow corridor that was flanked on either side by stout little cells. He leaned against the wall near the door, offering Joe Fry no assistance.

"I don't like yore attitude, Cooper!" Fry said hotly.

"And I don't like yore attitude, Mister!" Cooper snapped. "In the two weeks yuh've been nosin' around here tryin' to cut Littlejohn's sign, yuh've acted like I was dirt under yore feet, and called me a liar every time I said I hadn't seen this long hunk of noose bait around Rock Point in six or so months."

"Uh-huh, but I found Long Sam around here, didn't I?" Fry sneered.

"You did not!" Cooper retorted. "Yuh got a tip, two days ago, that Littlejohn was holed up at the old Gobbler Knob stage station, thirty miles north of here in the hill country. That's where yuh found him, ain't it?"

"So that's the way the wind blows!" Long Sam said angrily.

"What do you mean?" Cooper asked sharply.

"About a week ago, Mose Kimbaugh and them two runnin' mates of his, Luther Wright and Chip Brule, pushed a bunch of tired hosses past the old Gobbler Knob station," Long Sam said angrily. "I thought I got out of their sight, but evidently didn't make it."

"Yuh're barkin' up the wrong tree if yuh think Kimbaugh or any one of his boys tipped Fry off where to find yuh!" Cooper snorted.

"Who told yuh I was roostin' at that deserted stage station, Runt?" Long Sam asked Fry.

"Wouldn't yuh like to know!" the deputy glared.

"A note tellin' Fry where to look for yuh was shoved under his room door, down to Elby Sneed's Rio Queen Hotel, Long Sam," Marshall Cooper said gruffly. "The note was signed by a feller by the name of Bill Pelk."

"Catfish Bill?" Long Sam gaped. "He tipped off the law where to find me?"

"How did yuh find that out, Cooper?" Joe Fry asked angrily.

"It's only a guess that the note was shoved under yore door," Cooper shrugged lazily. "But yuh went off and left the note layin' on yore bed. Elby Sneed found it and fetched it to me. It's in my desk drawer, in case you want it."

"Head for a cell, Littlejohn!" Fry snapped. "I pulled a boner by forgettin' that note. But I've got yuh where yuh can't do Pelk a meanness for writin' it, so I reckon there's no harm done."

Long Sam walked back into the cell block, turning right into one of the little cages when Fry ordered it. The steel door clanged, the lock tumbers clicked home. But Long Sam paid no heed to those things. His mind was working like chain lightning, and there was a grim set to his wide mouth as he looked down through the bars into Joe Fry's exultant face.

"I'll hustle over a bait of grub, and yuh'd better eat it, Sammy!" Fry said. "There's a down-river stage through this hole around nine tonight, and we're boardin' that stage. Stick yore hands out here, and I'll get them cuffs off. But when we pile on that stage, Noose-bait, yuh'll be wearin' handcuffs *and* leg irons. Yuh're gallows bound this time, Long Boy!"

Fry walked away, whistling through his teeth as he pocketed the handcuffs he had taken off Long Sam's wrists. He slanted a hard look at Grat Cooper, who leaned against an empty cell and watched him.

"I'm keepin' the keys to yore jail until I'm ready to take my prisoner out," Fry said bluntly. "I'll leave Littlejohn's guns, and the rest of the stuff I took off him when I picked him up, out on your desk until I can get it packed for that stage trip."

Fry stalked on, swaggering a little. Cooper winked one reptilian eyes at Long Sam, then followed Fry out into the front office. Long Sam heard them talking and stamping around out there for about five minutes before Cooper returned, a coldly calculating look in his snaky eyes as he stopped before the outlaw's cell.

"Fry fetched yore stuff in," Cooper said slowly. "It's out there on my desk, guns and all."

Long Sam nodded, his mind racing at top speed. Grat Cooper was working up to something, and Long Sam meant to give him plenty of rope.

"I reckon I don't have to tell yuh that yuh're a gone goslin', Littlejohn!" Cooper droned.

"I know I'm sunk," Long Sam answered cautiously. "Fry will hustle me to Austin for trial. A jury won't waste two minutes passin' out a hangin' verdict, thanks to the things I'm charged with."

"Charged with, but not guilty of!" Cooper hissed. "Every time there's a crime along the border that can't be solved, Fry hollers yore name, and you get accused of it. But about the rawest deal yuh've ever got was Catfish Bill Pelk makin' out like he was yore friend, then tippin' Joe Fry off where to find yuh!"

Long Sam's hands were trembling a little when he took hold of the cell bars. Not for a single moment had he ever believed that Catfish Bill Pelk wrote that note to Joe Fry. But Grat Cooper only too obviously hoped he would believe that, and Long Sam thought grimly that he had a pretty good idea why Cooper would want him to think such a think.

"Yuh're right, Cooper!" he burst out. "The lowest trick a man can pull is to make out like he's yore friend, then knife yuh the minute yore back is turned."

"And if you was out of this jail-house, with a gun in yore fist, yuh'd likely make a bunch quitter outa that double-crossin' Catfish Bill Pelk, eh?" Cooper's grin was feral, his evil eyes intent.

Long Sam's nerves tightened up now until they threatened to crack. He knew what Grat Cooper was up to, and it made him so mad he felt choked. But he had no intention of letting the weasel-brained marshal get even a hint of his thoughts.

"If I was out of this cell you know derned well I'd go see that Catfish Bill Pelk!" he growled fiercely. "But I ain't out of jail, so there's no sense in workin' myself up about this."

Long Sam dropped his hands from the bars, turned away as he finished speaking. He took two strides towards a narrow cot that held a mound of filthy bedding before Marshal Grat Cooper's voice came, low and tense.

"Maybe you and me can make a dicker, Littlejohn!" the marshal said.

LONG SAM heeled around, looked at the snake-eyed man a moment, then stepped back to the cell door. His heart was jolting his ribs with excitement, yet he forced himself to frown as if he knew only puzzlement.

"Deal?" he echoed.

"I could peel this jail off yuh, Littlejohn!" Cooper leered. "Watch this."

He whipped a big key out of his pants pocket, stuck it in the lock. He twisted the key, opened the cell door a crack, then slammed and locked it again before Long Sam could have made a break for freedom had he wanted to.

"Pass key!" Cooper chortled, pocketing it.

"You mentioned a dicker, Cooper," Long Sam reminded, and made no attempt to hide his excitement and interest.

"I want Catfish Bill Pelk's hide hung on the fence even worse than you do, Littlejohn!" the marshal said venomously.

"Whoa, now!" Long Sam growled. "I'd take almost any kind of chance that would get me out of this jail, Cooper, for the law will sure hang me if I go to Austin. But I'd have to know that yuh've got a reason for wantin' Bill Pelk turned into Boothill fodder before I'd listen to your proposition."

"Afraid I'm offerin' you a chance to escape, aimin' to hide in the dark and cut myself a slice of reward money by cuttin' you down when you come out, eh?" Cooper grinned thinly.

"That stunt has been work on bounty-plastered roosters like me," Long Sam

said bluntly.

"It shore has!" Cooper agreed. "And if yuh had took my deal without question, I'd have knowed yuh aimed to head for Mexico without keepin' yore part of our bargain."

"We haven't made a bargain, yet!" Long Sam retorted. "But how come you faunchin' for Catfish Bill Pelk's scalp?"

"Betty Pelk is the reason!" Cooper snapped. "Betty is a fine gal, and so purty it makes a feller's head swim just to look at her. If Catfish Bill was six feet under, I could marry Betty in no time. That would make me king of one of the biggest spreads in this Texas brush country, Littlejohn!"

"You want Catfish Bill Pelk out of the way so you can marry his daughter, eh?" Long Sam droned, fighting down a desire to whip a fist between a couple of the cell bars and knock Grat Cooper's teeth out.

"I want yuh to drill that old hellion for me!" Cooper shot out. "I took to chousin' up to his house and settin' a spell each evenin', not long ago. But the minute Catfish Bill seen I was more interested in his daughter than I was in listenin' to his windies, he'd taken a six-shooter and run me off the place. I don't dast smoke him, or Betty would never speak to me again."

"How about Betty?" Long Sam asked slowly. "Did she want you to come courtin' her?"

"I'll take the starch out of that high-headed filly when the sign is right!" Cooper snorted. "You just give me yore word that yuh'll shoot Catfish Bill Pelk on sight, and I'll hand yuh the key to that cell."

"The old Judas Jinx again!" Long Sam growled.

"What do you mean by that?" Cooper wanted to know.

"I wouldn't be in jail if I hadn't refused to let Mose Kimbaugh use me to bait a gun trap he wanted to set for Joe Fry," Long Sam answered. "Now yuh're offerin' to skin this jail off me, providin' I turn Judas guns on Catfish Bill Pelk."

"Yore life is at stake, and Catfish Bill put yuh where yuh are at!" Copper snorted. "But I'll add five hundred cash dollars to the deal, since gettin' Pelk out of the way means a lot more to me than it will to you."

"They say money talks, Cooper!" Long Sam made himself grin. "Wrap five hundred around that key and pass it to me."

"You'll get the dinero *after* Bill Pelk is took care of!" Cooper grinned. "I'll give yuh the key, and when yuh get out go straight to Pelk's house. I'll be at that gate in the south side of the fence around Pelk's house, down close to the river. After yuh down Pelk, run for that gate, Littlejohn. I'll be waitin' there with five hundred dollars and a fresh hoss."

Long Sam grinned inwardly, knowing exactly what would happen in case he went running from Bill Pelk's ranch house down to that gate in the south side of the fence. Marshal Grat Cooper would be at that gate, sure thing. But he would be squatted down in the shadows, ready to pay off in smoking lead, not coin of the realm.

"Pass me the key, Cooper," the gaunt outlaw said. "I'll gather up my six-pistols and head straight for Pelk's house. You be at the gate, and have the five hundred in yore hand. I sure won't have time to fiddle around while you count the money after I get there."

"I've got a wallet in my hip pocket with better than a thousand dollars in it!" Cooper declared. "I'll have yore five hundred counted out and ready for yuh. Here's the key. Give me a few minutes to locate Fry, so's I can be with him when we get back here with yore supper and find you gone. Take the key with you when yuh leave. I'll make out like I think Fry didn't lock the cell proper when he jailed yuh."

Long Sam took the key, excitement pounding through him. He watched Grat Cooper slink away through the gloom of dusk that had crept into the building, and stood unmoving until he heard the screen on the front door slam.

"Now, you tricky hellion, we'll see what yore snaky schemes get yuh!" Long Sam gritted, and pushed the key into the lock.

Long Sam Littlejohn found his guns and other possessions on Grat Cooper's desk, and stood sweating and tight-nerved, watching through a dusty window pane while dusk turned to black night. He stepped out to Rock Point's street when darkness came, hat pulled low, forcing himself to move casually.

Sleeper and Joe Fry's bay were still

there at the hitch-rack, and Long Sam's nerves made tom-tom music in his ears as he went up into the saddle and started walking the roan out to the center of the street. Most people were indoors, eating supper. Yet a few figures moved along the dirt walks, starkly outlined now and then against the lighted windows they strolled past.

DESPITE bucking nerves, Long Sam got his horse in the middle of the street and rode along at a walk, as if he were in no hurry at all. He had an almost uncontrollable desire to roll his spurs along Sleeper's ribs and head for the Rio, knowing he could get safely to Mexico before Joe Fry or anyone else could stop him. But there were things more important than his own safety at stake now, and the gaunt outlaw held his horse down to a slow walk until the tall white fence around Catfish Bill Pelk's ranchhouse loomed dimly ahead of him.

"You're creepin' up on my place mighty cautious, Mister!" a man's voice lashed out harshly.

His nerves already keyed up, Long Sam jumped as if a gun had gone off beside him. But there was a shaky note of laughter in his throat even as he pulled to a stop.

"Quit scarin' the daylights out of me, Bill, and be careful with whatever kind of a gun yuh've got slanted my way," the outlaw called.

"Sam!" the voice came from just inside the great arched gateway, then a small figure came rushing through the shadows, spur rowels tinkling accompaniment to the thud of boot heels.

"I just got in from the hill country where I summer graze my best steers, Sam," Catfish Bill Pelk said harshly. "Betty and her mammy lit into me somethin' fierce, sayin' you was in the town *jusgado*, and that the story got around that I wrote Joe Fry a note, tellin' him where he could pick yuh up. I started to the jail on foot, aimin' to Injun up and have a talk with yuh, Sam. I never done no such sneakin' thing as tip Fry off, and I hope—"

"Simmer down, Bill!" Long Sam interrupted. "We've got no time for jawin', for heck is sure due to pop any minute. But don't get the notion I believed you wrote that note that sent Fry after me."

Swiftly, Long Sam explained what had happened, starting with Joe Fry's surprise visit to his camp at sunup that morning, and ending with Grat Cooper handing him a key to the cell Fry had put him in. Long Sam was grinning into the night as he finished the account, for Catfish Bill Pelk was so mad he was swearing himself hoarse.

"I'll fix that Cooper snake, Sam!" the grizzled little cowman fumed. "He wrote that note to Joe Fry and signed my name to it, I'll bet, hopin' yuh'd shoot me on sight. I run Grat Cooper off my place for rollin' them snake's eyes of his at Betty. She would jump in the river and forget to come up before she'd have anything to do with him or any scum like him. But Cooper must have got the notion that he could bully my girl into marryin' him if I was out of the way!"

"Of course Grat Cooper wrote that note to Joe Fry," Long Sam said. "Mose Kimbaugh and them two runnin' mates of his waitin' out yonder in the thickets to kill Fry and fetch me on to town was part of a well-laid plan, too."

"By grab, that's right!" Pelk cried. "Kimbaugh and them other two-legged lobos didn't aim to beef Joe Fry just for cussedness. Grat Cooper must have hired them to help him with his plot against me."

"Cooper *ordered* Mose Kimbaugh, Luther Wright and Chip Brule to do what they tried to do," Long Sam observed stonily.

"What do you mean by that, Sam?" Catfish Bill Pelk asked sharply.

"Bill, you and me and a lot of other folks have always suspected that Mose Kimbaugh didn't have the brains to plan the kind of crooked deals he gets away with," Long Sam said grimly. "Well, don't you sorta see behind the barn now?"

"Grat Cooper?" Pelk's voice was startled. "Do yuh think he's the brains behind Mose Kimbaugh?"

"There's no doubt about it," the gaunt outlaw said firmly. "Cooper has been so smooth nobody even suspected him. But he got to wantin' this huge Ladder P ranch of yores so bad so's he could make it into a smugglers' paradise that he overplayed his hand in this deal."

"Grat Coooper overplayed his hand when he took to wartin' a feller by the name of Long Sam Littlejohn!" Pelk said grimly. "But you just set tight here until I can get back to the house and rout them brushbustin' cowhands of mine. We'll go gather up Grat Cooper, and if he turns out to be the brains behind that Kimbaugh bunch we'll— What's that?"

The little cattleman's voice pitched up sharply on the last sentence. From the light-dappled street came a ringing yell, then a momentary silence that was followed by other shouts and the growing sound of rushing feet.

"Joe Fry has just found out that I ain't in jail," Long Sam said gravely. "Hightail back home, Bill, and forget about gatherin' yore cowhands. Wait ten minutes, then stick a pistol out one of yore windows and fire two or three fast shots."

"What's the idea in that?" Pelk cried.

"We can't waste time jawin'!" Long Sam said bluntly. "Get home, and fire those shots."

"Where will yuh go, what will yuh be doin'?" Pelk asked.

"I'll be collectin' the five hundred dollars I told you Grat Cooper offered for yore scalp," Long Sam chuckled grimly. "Only I didn't tell him I'd beef yuh, Bill. I told him I'd call on yuh, which I was doin' when yuh stopped me here at the gate. Adios, and don't forget to fire those shots."

Long Sam rode away before the excited cattleman could start arguing, going south toward the river along the tall, white fence. He turned west when he came to the fence corner, riding close to the fence until he found the gate Grat Cooper had described.

"So far, so good," Long Sam muttered, and rode to a thick stand of willows that grew on the river's edge.

Long Sam was crouched down in tall weeds near the gate in the south side of Catfish Bill Pelk's yard fence, worrying about the chiggers he was sure to get off the weeds, when he heard the riders coming. He forgot the chiggers and crouched a little lower, watching four horsemen ride up within a dozen yards of him.

"This will do!" Grat Cooper's voice lashed out. "Now you three clumsy fools see if you can keep from pullin' some kind of a bone-headed trick that will let Littlejohn get away."

The four men dismounted and hurried toward the gate in Pelk's fence, passing so close to Long Sam he could have stuck out a leg and tripped them. But he let them pass, grinning coldly as he slid his guns out of leather and watched them stop at the gate.

"Littlejohn will be hightailin' when he shows up," Cooper said snappishly. "But he's cagey, and will likely call to me before he gets too close to this gate. You three splatter-brained fools keep quiet until I get him told that I've got the five hundred dollars I promised him in my hand. Don't neither one of you numbskulls even breathe until Littlejohn gets so close we can blow his head off before he knows there's anything wrong."

"Boss, quit ridin' me and Luther and Chip!" Mose Kimbaugh's deep voice grumbled. "We had some bad luck today, sure. But Joe Fry didn't come along with Littlejohn handcuffed the way he figgered he would, so we was kinda throwed off."

"Excuses!" Grat Cooper sneered. "Because Fry hadn't caught Littlejohn yet, you three idiots— There! That's the end of Catfish Bill Pelk!"

COOPER'S voice ended on a note of evil gloating when a six-shooter barked four swift shots up at the distant Ladder P ranch house. Long Sam Littlejohn stood up when he heard those shots, unconsciously humming a familiar range dirge through set teeth.

"Say, what's that noise?" Mose Kimbaugh's startled voice boomed out.

"Sounds like somebody hummin'," Chip Brule declared.

"I see the feller that's hummin'!" Luther Wright shrilled. "He sneaked up behind us."

Long Sam had stepped out of the weeds. He was humming the doleful tune more loudly now, and suddenly Grat Cooper's voice squalled in profane surprise.

"Littlejohn!" Cooper howled. "He always hums that funeral music when he's fightin' mad. He has tricked us, men. Cut him down!"

Powder blaze tongued the night, and gun-thunder rolled along the Rio Grande in mounting waves. Long Sam's six-shooters were bucking in his palms, throwing a deadly hail of smoking lead at

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the weaving, darting shadows of the four men before him. Being ambidextrous, he was one of the few two-gun men who could actually shoot as well with one hand as the other. And he was using that unusual skill to its fullest now, lacing a deadly fire at the men who crouched behind guns that spat roaring death at him.

A bullet ripped the skin across Long Sam's right cheek, causing him to dodge violently. But even as he flinched from the bullet's sting, he saw one of the four shadowy figures before him topple to the ground. His guns roared quickly again, and a second enemy went down.

"Two down, two to go!" Long Sam chanted, watching a burly shadow rush at him.

The gaunt outlaw swung to meet the head-on rush, knowing the man diving at him was big Mose Kimbaugh. Long Sam's guns fired in unison, and the twin slugs slammed Kimbaugh to the ground as if a horse had kicked him.

A slug tore through Long Sam's right leg, throwing him off balance. The bullet had missed the bone and Long Sam kept his feet, smoky eyes riveted on Grat Cooper, who was making a break for his waiting horse and shooting as fast as he could lift and drop the hammer of his gun.

Long Sam threw a snap-shot at Cooper, hoping to rattle him and spoil his aim. The gaunt outlaw blinked in amazement when Cooper crashed down, his spitting gun silenced.

Long Sam quit humming the range dirge and stood erect, hastily reloading hot guns before sliding them into leather. From the town's distant street came a lot of excited yelling, and the outlaw knew that Joe Fry and Rock Point's citizens would be coming to investigate the shooting.

"If yuh can hear me, Cooper, dig out yore wallet!" Long Sam snapped. "You owe me five hundred dollars, and I aim to collect."

"You dirty thnake, I owe yuh thomethin', all right, but not money" Grat Cooper said in a shaky, lisping voice.

"What makes yuh talk so funny?" Long Sam asked sharply.

"Yore thlug knocked my upper front teeth out, yuh thon of a thidewinder!" Cooper panted. "If I can find my gun, I'll thallivate yuh yet!"

Long Sam jumped forward, yanked Cooper to his feet, and hustled him away from the spot where he had lost his gun.

"Sam!" a voice bawled. "Yuh hear me, boy?"

That was Catfish Bill Pelk yelling. Long Sam glanced over the fence and saw Pelk and a bunch of the Ladder P cowhands running toward him. There were three lighted lanterns in the bunch, and every man had a gun in his hand.

"Take it easy, Bill!" Long Sam called. "But hustle one of those lanterns out here, amigo. I need a little light."

Pelk and his men came through the gate, eyes goggling as they looked around. Grat Cooper's face was a gruesome sight, for the slug that had torn his teeth out had also done a lot of damage to his left cheek and upper lip.

"Howlin' centipedes, Sam!" Pelk cried. "You shore made hash out of this batch of cussed crooks. But yuh're shot up some, too!"

"I'm nicked some, but that's nothin' to what I'll get if I dally around here until Joe Fry shows up!" Long Sam said. "Hold a lantern handy, while I see if Cooper packs a wallet, the way he claimed he does."

Pelk held a lantern while Long Sam dug a fat wallet out of Grat Cooper's hip pocket. Cooper cursed lispingly and tried to kick him, but the gaunt outlaw skittered out of reach, took a thick sheaf of yellow-backed bills from the wallet, and carefully counted out five hundred dollars. He returned the balance of the money to the billfold, tossed it to the ground at Cooper's feet.

"Yuh robbed me!" Cooper choked. "Yuh didn't keep yore part of our bargain."

"All I promised to do for five hundred dollars was 'call' on Bill Pelk," Long Sam drawled. "I done that, so I just took my pay. But Joe Fry will believe you if yuh claim I robbed yuh, Cooper. He'll put it on the books against me, too. If that'll be any comfort to you while yuh sweat out the rest of yore rotten life in the pen, yuh're welcome."

"Me?" Cooper glared. "I'll never go to prithon, yuh tricky whelp!"

"Guess again!" Long Sam said coldly. "Mose Kimbaugh and Chip Brule look

[*Turn page*]

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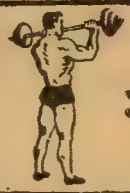

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plenty dead, so they can't testify against yuh. But I see Luther Wright battin' his killer's eyes, and from the blood on his sleeve I'd say he's sufferin' nothin' worse than a broken arm. When Bill Pelk and a few other decent people start danglin' a noose in front of Wright, I reckon yuh know, Cooper, that he will talk long, loud and fast."

Grat Cooper took one look at the only living member of his cutthroat gang, swore in a frightened way, and tried to bolt. But Catfish Bill Pelk and his cowboys let Cooper look into the bores of their six-shooters, and he decided to stand hitched.

"Watch the willers around my boat landin', which is at the bottom of this bank, Sam," Catfish Bill advised, grinning at the outlaw. "In a day or so, yuh'll see a white rag tied to one of them bushes, which will tell yuh that Joe Fry has left Rock Point. I'll bait them two trotlines I keep across the current out there. When yuh see that white cloth, swim yore horse across. We'll have us a catfish fry, and me and a lot of other people will try to tell yuh we appreciate what yuh've done in cleanin' out this nest of crooks for us."

"I'll watch for that white rag, Bill," Long Sam promised. Swiftly, he stepped into the shadows beyond the lantern light, then ran to where he had left Sleeper.

THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 9)

landscape that I had known years before. On the San Carlos Indian Reservation in Arizona.

As usual I came onto an experience that topped mine, like the Alaska soldier did with his mastodon yarn. I came onto it in reading how a man convicted of murder cleared himself by producing a photograph of himself in a locality far way from the scene of the crime and getting an astronomer to testify that the picture was taken on the day of the killing. Seems like an expert star-gazer can tell exactly the year, day and hour a picture is taken from the way the sun's shadows fall.

That's getting an alibi down pretty fine, isn't it?

The science of crime detection has gone far since Texas Rangers tamed frontier badmen. More and more, crime has got to be a sure-

fire losing proposition. On top of that, most crooks come by their loot harder than if they'd worked for it, honest.

There are many unsolved crimes, including murders, on police records. But that doesn't prove that the culprits escaped punishment, not by a long shot. In plenty of such cases they've paid the penalty for crimes they committed that were solved.

There's an old saying, give a man enough rope and he'll hang himself. Most lawmen believe that. They know that in the long run a crook gets cocky and careless and reaches the end of his rope.

Okay, folks. We'll continue this chat next month. Now I'll let the editor talk.

—CAPTAIN STARR.

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

A KILLER is loose! And the grim specter of death prowls Brasada County in Texas. On the ranges punchers ride with rifles balanced across their pummels, their worried eyes watching the shadows of cactus and boulders. In the town of Brasada storekeeper, liveryman, and bootmaker are locking themselves in at sundown, and sleeping with a .45 Colt under their pillows. For terror haunts the cowtown—terror in the form of a mad, mysterious murderer with a maniacal grudge against mankind.

That's the suspense that Jackson Cole packs into his next spine-tingling novel for TEXAS RANGERS. It's entitled THE KIOWA KILLER. And once again it features Jim Hatfield, the Lone Wolf, that hard-riding, trigger-quick, cool-brained champion of the great Ranger corps of the Lone Star state.

Once again Hatfield's powers of crime-deduction are put to the test. Once again his lightning draw is called into action. And again his magnificent horse Goldy is sent driving into action on the danger trail. And it all starts with the speed of a flaming arrow.

At least twenty people must have seen Sheriff Todd Kramer seated at his checkerboard in the jail office, including old friends who waved and called a greeting to the grizzled Texas lawman as they passed the open door of the Brasada County jail. Yet not one of them paused to wonder why Kramer didn't look up or answer them, or guessed the reason.

Sheriff Todd Kramer was dead!

Hunkered over his checker layout, spurred boot heels hooked over the scuffed rung of his ancient cane-bottomed chair, one elbow on the table, his gnarled fist cupped under a lean jaw,

[*Turn page*]

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rheumy eyes studying the checkers with blinkless concentration. Sheriff Todd Kramer's corpse looked lifelike enough.

So it was understandable why the fact of Kramer's murder went undetected, though his corpse sat in plain view of the traffic passing on the wheel-rutted street. He was deaf in his off ear, which would account for his ignoring the calls of passing friends; and when Todd Kramer concentrated on a knotty checkerboard problem, you could fire a twelve-gauge shotgun under his nose without disturbing him.

The whole county knew about the sheriff's checker tournament with his deputy "Boojum" Vozar, and "Red-Jack" Skellet, the blind man who ran the locksmith and saddle shop on Tres Cruces Street. The three contestants had wagered their most cherished possessions on the outcome of the tournament.

And so this simple, charming life of the small cowtown was sent into a violent tailspin. On the checkerboard, weighted down by a shotgun shell, is a yellow card upon which has been printed in type:

SHERIFF KRAMER MADE THE MISTAKE OF SENDING FOR A TEXAS RANGER TO DAB HIS LOOP ON THE KIOWA KILLER

This was the third time that Brasada County had felt the vengeance of the unknown terrorist who had dubbed himself "The Kiowa Killer."

When Ranger Jim Hatfield dismounts from Goldy at the door of the sheriff's office, goes inside to find Deputy Boojum Vozar and Red-Jack Skellet, the blind locksmith, viewing the remains of Sheriff Kramer, the deputy tells the Lone Wolf:

"This Kiowa Killer has murdered three prominent citizens in Brasada County durin' the past year. First, it was Rex Kohler, the president of the Big Seven Freighting Corporation. They found his carcass swingin' from a cottonwood seven or eight miles up the Pecos. One of the Killer's yellow cards was pinned to Kohler's shirt."

Going to an iron safe behind the sheriff's desk, the deputy spins the combination dial and opens the vault door. He turns back to Hatfield with an envelope, from which he takes a rectangular, yellow cardboard measuring some five-by-seven inches in size.

REX KOHLER DIDN'T HEED MY WARNING SO HE DREW A HANGROPE. SIX MORE TO GO BEFORE MY REVENGE IS FINISHED.
THE KIOWA KILLER

"Six more to go!" Hatfield exclaims. "Then the sheriff here—"

"Is number three," Red-Jack Skellet puts in. "Nobody knows who The Kiowa Killer is or what revenge he's after. Mizzou Jaybeck was the Killer's second victim. He ran a land office here in Brasada. They found him with a double-bitted ax stickin' in his skull. Murdered in his sleep a couple of weeks after we buried Rex Kohler."

Without speaking, Boojum Vozar takes a second piece of yellow cardboard from the safe envelope and shows it to Hatfield.

I WARNED JAYBECK TO LOCK UP HIS LAND OFFICE AND VAMOOSE. HE DIDN'T. NOW HE AIN'T ABLE TO.

THE KIOWA KILLER

Three were dead, and four more men were to go—if The Kiowa Killer's boast was not called by Ranger Jim Hatfield!

The Lone Wolf spurs into action. Not only to save the lives of the four threatened men, and not only because a charming young lady's love affair is in jeopardy, but because Hatfield's own life is threatened. He is returning to his hotel one evening—

The whistling sound of an object zipping through space was the Ranger's first hint of peril awaiting him in Room 13. He leaped back instinctively, hand plummeting to gun belt.

Then a gun barrel smashed against his skull, and the Ranger's brain seemed to explode. A black vortex whirled about him, engulfing his senses. He was not conscious of sprawling in a heap on the bedroom floor.

Consciousness returned to the lawman a few minutes later. His instinctive dodging movement had saved him from a crushed skull and certain death. Pulling himself to his feet, Hatfield peered back down the corridor. It was deserted.

Closing and locking his door, the Ranger fumbled on the dresser until he found the coal-oil lamp there. Thumbing flame from a match, he lighted the lampwick and set the glass chimney in its brass-pronged bracket. Then, in the act of adjusting the wick, Hatfield froze.

A message had been scribbled in block letters across the bulbous glass chimney of the lamp, letters written with a stub of tallow candle or a lump of bee's wax.

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Even as the Ranger stared, he saw the waxen letters waver and turn liquid on the glass chimney. Then The Kiowa Killer's scribbled warning was a mere wisp of smoke in his nostrils.

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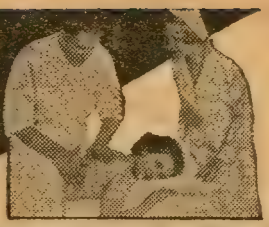

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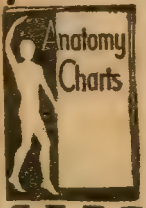

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OUR MAIL BAG

IT'S plenty interesting to open up the letters that come into the office of TEXAS RANGERS. We always get our boots cocked up on the desk, sit back, load up the pipe, and—sometimes—absorb a little punishment. Of course, the letters we like the best are the ones that tell us about the glorious West. If there's a bit of sarcasm, we don't mind. Here's a good letter for you:

In an edition of TEXAS RANGERS the question was asked: Why did old covered wagon drivers prefer steers (oxen) to horses and mules?

Apparently you do not pay a great deal of attention to the yarns in your magazine, or you would have known that steers go crazy and stampede at the sound of gunfire, whereas horses and mules, especially mules, adapt themselves readily and quickly to rifle fire and big gun fire, and also bombing, as I know from experience in World War I.

Of course our pioneers had a much easier country to traverse than yours, as water and forage were easier to find, and I can only advance my opinion as a Canadian, one born in Winnipeg, Man. My parents arrived in Winnipeg in the winter of 1872, having made the trip by stage from Moorehead, Minn. With my parents I stood on the station platform and saw the first train pulling in, so I must know something of transportation at that time.

There is something once heard that can never be forgotten, and that is the ungodly screeching of wooden wheels rolling on wooden axles. I can assure you no advance party was necessary to announce the arrival of a train of bull-carts, as you could hear them miles away. What memories are recalled as I write these lines!

There were several reasons why the ox was preferable to the horse and the mule.

First, oxen had weight, and due to that and to their steady plodding, they handled their loads easier, and kept the line of march better than horses and mules.

Second, open feet were better adapted to cover soggy ground, whereas mules must have good footing and are no good over wet or snow-covered trails.

Third, an ox can travel longer without water.

Fourth, and most important, an ox is quite happy and keeps in better condition on grass, which makes it unnecessary to carry grain.

Fifth, in case of necessity, due to scarcity of game over a tough old trail, the ox was preferable to either horse or mule meat.

Sixth, in those days oxen were much cheaper and more readily obtainable than horses or mules of equal-hauling capacity, and, another thing, the number of oxen required was about fifty per cent less than horses or mules.

I do know that four brigades using oxen on their trips from the Rockies to Fort Garry (Winnipeg) beat the time of the horse-drawn brigades by two or three weeks, due to their steady pace and their greater staying power on grass feed.—*J. R. Benson, Gold Bridge, B. C., Canada.*

That was all powerful interesting Mr. Benson, and we wish more of our dyed-in-the-hide Westerners would tell about their experiences. We'd sure print those letters. Of course, we don't aim to leave out nice ones like the following:

I would like you to know that I very rarely read Western stories, but one day a year or so back, I was shown your magazine with the Jim Hatfield stories, and although I still find some Western stories a bore, I can't say that about the Hatfield series, and you can count on me as a regular reader of the stories—*Tom Jones, Burma, British Army.*

I have just finished reading LOOT OF THE WOLF by Jackson Cole, and I think it is one of the best ones you have ever had that I have been reading, and I have been reading them quite a while. I was so much interested in the novels that I overlooked the MAIL BAG until lately.—*Melva Brenneman, Brookville, Penn.*

My friend and I would like to know if Jim Hatfield's horse is a gelding or a stallion, and, also, if he is a sorrel. I am reading my seventh TEXAS RANGERS book at this minute.—*Robert Lipsyte, Forest Hills, N. Y.*

Well, Mr. Lipsyte, Goldy is a gelding, sorrel in color. We hope you continue reading TEXAS RANGERS until the seventy-umph number. And we're glad you wrote in.

And all the rest of you readers, get out the writing tools and let 'er rip. The address is The Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. We'll be waiting to hear from you, and we'll sure have more space next issue for a slew of fine letters. Thanks, everybody!

—THE EDITOR.

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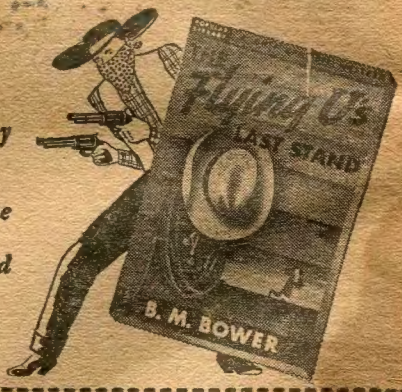

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